THE RAT-TRAP

By the Same Author

THE STORY OF EDEN

THE RAT-TRAP

By

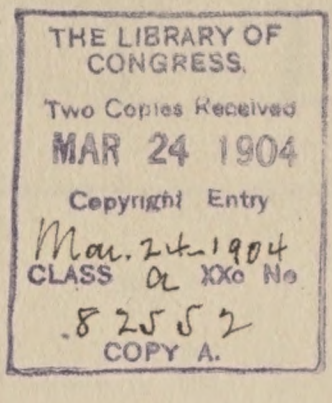
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TO
THE GENERAL PUBLIC

The only critic
whose opinion is finally
worth having

CHARACTERS

Evelyn Gregory, Administrator and Colonial Secretary of Key Island

Alfred Halton, commissioned to enquire into the causes of recent riots when the island was under the administration of the British African Island Company

The Hon. Arthur White, Attorney-General of Key Island

Major Bute Churton (the Wessex Regiment), Officer commanding H. M. Troops in Key Island

Gifford Ambroise, Town Warden of Port Albert

John Burton, Town Warden of China Town

Melton Hanney, British Consul at Port Cecil, East Africa

Captain Alaric Lewin (28th Lancers), Private Secretary and A. D. C. to the Administrator of Key Island

Captain Bristow Nugent (Wessex Regiment)

Lieutenant Hamilton Gurney (Wessex Regiment)

Captain Wray Gilderoy (Royal Garrison Artillery at Key Island)

Second Lieutenant Edward Rennie (Royal Garrison Artillery at Key Island)

Lieutenant George Clayton (Army Service Corps)

The Rev. Archie Lysle (Chaplain to the Forces)

Captain Ritchie Stern, R.N., commanding H.M.S. *Greville*

The Hon. James Denver, Sugar Planter, Member of the Legislative Council

Abdallah, Captain Lewin's Arab butler

Leoline Lewin, Captain Lewin's wife

Diana Churton, Major Churton's wife

Alice Gilderoy, Captain Gilderoy's wife

Eva Clayton, Lieutenant Clayton's wife

Blanche Stern, Captain Ritchie Stern's wife

Mrs. Arthur White (wife of the Attorney-General)

Beatrix Denver (James Denver's daughter)

CHAPTER I

"Beware of fire, of water, of savage dogs, and of the man who talks under his breath."—*English Proverb.*

THE troop-ship was twenty-four hours before her time in arriving, which put the authorities out, for they like to take their leisure in Key Island and as the thermometer rarely stands below 88° in the shade they have some reason for their objection to hurry. The bungalow which Government had thoughtfully apportioned to the private secretary and A.D.C. to the Administrator was not ready, and word came down to the ship that he must please to spend the night at the hotel, whereat Captain Alaric Lewin swore in fluent English (he could have done the same in five different languages) and wanted to know why the several dashes Government had parted him from his regiment and sent him to an asterisk hole like Key Island, if they did not mean to provide him with a blank shelter when he got there. It was all very well for his predecessor, who had been a bachelor; but Captain Lewin was a married man, and a six-months-old husband to boot. He objected to taking his wife to dubious Colonial "hotels"—so-called.

Out in the sunshine of the deck Mrs. Lewin was sitting among her baggage (while she waited for her lord and master to have arranged matters before taking her ashore), because she knew no better, the

atmospheric conditions and effects of Key Island being as yet a sealed book to her. She was watching the men formed up and marched off the gangway, and formed up again on the wharf, and finally departing in a cloud of dust and sunshine to the barracks on the Maitso Hill. Now and then an officer saluted her in passing, and she nodded back and smiled, for the five days out from Cape Town had been worth an intimacy of three weeks on shore. There was idle speculation in her gaze as it rested on this small corner of the British Empire, in which her present lot was cast; but in this present moment of coming close to it Key Island was no more than a flat picture on her mind of an absurd little white town tufted with palms, and completely overweighted by that harbour and the wharves which the Government were converting into a great coaling station, the whole shut in by the exquisite hills, loaded with timber and softly drawn against a sky of pure deep blue. There is no bluer sky than that which hangs above Key Island, and reflects itself in the Mozambique Channel all round it on a clear day, but Mrs. Lewin saw no more than the outward semblance of the place. It takes characters in a landscape to endue it with vitality either to present sense or bitter memory. All she saw on this occasion was the green slopes of Maitso and Mitsinjovy, forming each side of the bay, and beyond them the principal feature of the harbour, —two great conical rocks, rising sheer from the sea to the height of two thousand feet, which the English call the Gates, but the native population, who have caught strange words from Madagascar, name Teraka and Tsofotra, Sunrise and Sunset. There is a half-mile of blue water between the base of the right and left Gate, and between them the troopship had but lately passed, giving Mrs. Lewin a

profile view of their frowning sides. It was practically impossible not to see the Gates, because they were as giants in the landscape ; but the significance of their name and position, shutting in the little tropical island at which she had but just arrived, was as yet an unknown tongue to her. She had not heard them close softly behind her, and bar the way to the outer world, as residents grow to fancy that they have after a while.

"Port Victoria!" said Mrs. Lewin musingly, her thoughts reverting to the tumbled houses and the windy palms. "I wonder if it will ever grow up to its name? At present it might be called Little Vic."

Her thoughts were distracted by the white figure of her husband coming along the deck, and distinct against the other units in khaki as a white sheep amongst a flock of brown. He was immaculate, but cross, and one end of his moustache was caught between his teeth, and his handsome face looked darker than usual because he did not appear upon the edge of a smile, which was his normal expression.

"We must go to the hotel, Chum," he said. "No help for it. Come out of the sun. What made you sit there?"

"I don't feel it very hot. Don't bother about me, Ally, I expect the hotel will be bearable—you wouldn't mind it for yourself." The habit of a lifetime, rather than the relationship of six months, had taught Leoline Lewin to classify every shade on her husband's face with sub-conscious accuracy. She had no least intention of knowing Ally's mind for him, but she did it all the same.

"There is no help for it, anyway," Captain Lewin said. "I've got a buggy—our luggage will come up behind us."

Mrs. Lewin followed him off the boat and across the dusty road to the Customs House, and so through the farce of having their luggage examined, to the ramshackle conveyance drawn by a broken-kneed pony, which was bunched up forlornly in the shade of the Customs House.

"Couldn't we go up by tram, Ally?" she said, a little comically. "This is so musty—and the trams look quite clean and airy!"

"Oh, they are only intended for the niggers, going up and down from the coaling, or for people connected with the wharves!" remarked Captain Lewin with unusual irony. "Everything exists here simply to be a convenience to the wharves and the coaling, you will find. Mere human beings don't count in the new Government scheme!" He helped her into the buggy, and flung his own big dissatisfied self into the seat beside her, which creaked beneath his weight, for Captain Lewin rode twelve stone for his five feet eleven inches. The buggy rumbled along, pitching like a ship, and gave Mrs. Lewin a glimpse of open stores and motley groups of coloured people, an undrained street, and now and then a large, hard building, obviously new and solid, and as out of keeping with the older houses as the town with the harbour. The whole place had an unfinished appearance, as of a production begun by one workman and put down as hopeless, and then taken up by another who had not yet matured his plan for improvement.

The buggy came to a stop before one of the older houses, a long rough bungalow with a wide stoep, and empty doorways like open mouths, in and out of which a small white Chinaman passed now and then, monotonously bent on business. These were the waiters and servants of the Hotel Natale, who bore the badge of the place on their

grass-cloth liveries, and the caps on their heads, which, by the way, they only wore until it should be time to shave themselves, according to the laws of Confucius. They swarmed out of the place like the white ants on the wooden railing to the stoep, spread themselves on the luggage in the hinder cart, and carried Captain and Mrs. Lewin into the hotel in a whirlwind of their own property.

"Get us two rooms—and be quick about it!" Alaric said shortly. "I'm very sorry, Chum—but at all events it's a place to rest and clean up in."

His wife had passed him and walked into the cool shadows beyond the stoep with some interest and curiosity in her face. She was a tall girl, and had an enquiring way of carrying her chin, but her interest was really unfeigned, for beyond England her experiences had been limited to the Continent, and there was nothing Continental in the Hotel Natale. Before Mrs. Lewin stretched a long carpetless passage, some seventeen feet high, and lighted by one large whitewashed window at the further end. It was the only real window, with glass panes, in Port Victoria, as she afterwards found, and its proprietor was proud of it. All the rest consisted of frames filled with wooden blinds, or shutters that would shift up and down, to let in the air or shut out the light. The windows in Mrs. Lewin's bedroom were on this plan, as she found when the Chinese scurried before her and piled her boxes in the middle of the huge bare room. There was neither light nor bell in the hotel, but they brought her one candle, and Ally's dressing-room was next door, so she managed as best she might. By and by she wandered in to him to see how he fared, and found his apartment the counterpart of her own, as to furnishing—a narrow bed, with a dirty mosquito curtain over it, a chest of drawers, without paint or key, a basket-

work chair, a washstand, and a looking-glass. Captain Lewin in his shirt-sleeves appeared the most valuable thing in the room. A good-looking man is never more good-looking than in that severely simple costume, and despite the fact that he was red from wrestling with his shirt case, and swearing at the hotel and all its resources all over again, he seemed to his wife a goodly possession.

"What *are* you doing, Ally?" Mrs. Lewin said, coming to the rescue, and taking the keys out of his hand with cool, soft fingers. "Here, you helpless boy, I'll valet you to-night. I suppose the Chinese are not reliable?"

"Don't suppose they know the use of a stud, except to loot it. It's awfully good of you, Chum. Got it open, already? I'll engage a man before I'm many hours older. But look here, if you'll unpack the things I shall want, I'll go and get you some tea!"

She laughed at the wheedling tone, and accepted the bribe. Even at five o'clock in the day it was hot, with the clinging, muscle-sapping heat of the tropics, but Chum had the vitality and sting of an English winter still in her veins, and did not suffer as yet. She did some unpacking—her own as well as Ally's—and drank the tea he ordered in lieu of his own whiskey and soda; and then she dressed for dinner, coming into his room again to have her blouse fastened, for it hooked at the back. Ally was in a better temper; he manipulated the complicated fastening wonderfully with his large hands, and stooped to kiss his wife's pretty neck.

"You're too good to be wasted on this damned hole—beg pardon, Chum!" he said, "I wish I'd got you out to Malta, or some other decent station."

"What does it matter, old boy? The blouse is

just as pretty for you to look at on Key Island, and you can't hope for Malta at your age without unprecedented luck. Let's make the best of our step up — private secretary and A.D.C. is something, anyway."

"I expect it will be too, with this man. I was told at Cape Town he was a Tartar."

"Know anything of him?"

"Nothing. He's been somewhere on the Indian frontier, quelling rebellions without much ceremony, and a good deal of unofficial slaughter. The Government always sends him out when there's trouble to squash, and then censures him when he's done it. He's here now to expiate his sins, his measures having been a little too drastic to be winked at any longer."

"Oh!" said Chum thoughtfully, "he must be one of our few strong men. And they are worth having behind you, Ally. Let us annex the Administrator, you and I, and make him the good geni of our fortunes!"

"It would be the first time that Gregory was any one's good geni!" said Ally dryly. "They say he works his men to death, and when he can get no more out of 'em, he throws 'em aside like a spent cartridge-case. Come on, Chum — that fiendish row on a gong means some sort of a meal, I suppose."

"Is my hair all right?" said Mrs. Lewin carelessly, as she tucked her hand into his arm.

He looked down at her somewhat critically, for he set much store by appearance, and nodded. From his point of view it was unfortunate that Leoline was cast in too individual a mould to be turned out quite like the well-groomed, clean young Englishwoman whom the Mother Country breeds in serviceable batches as wives for sensible men.

But common-sense had done much for Mrs. Alaric Lewin, and had made her as near her husband's ideal as Nature would go. It was really only her hair which gave Chum much anxiety now, for its splendid weight and ripples did not lend themselves very well to the mode of the moment, but she laboured with it earnestly, and by the aid of a hair-net gave it something the sameness of other women's. She had no desire to be conspicuous.

"It's all right—but don't wear it over your ears, whatever you do!" Ally advised, as they went down the empty, echoing passage arm in arm. "We can stand anything but that."

"But, Ally, it's the fashion—which doesn't matter; and a pretty one—which does!"

"Can't help it. Men always hate it. When we see a woman with her hair dressed so, we always say she hasn't washed her ears this morning!"

"Pigs!" said Chum, laughing. "It's your own unclean minds. Ally, isn't the waiter the image of Ah Sin!"

"Yes, says his name's Chun Low, or some such variation—but it doesn't matter. Have some chicken, Chum—I'm afraid it's not up to much."

"I never quarrel with my food," said Chum contentedly, attacking the tough fowl.

The coffee-room at the Natale was like a parochial hall, or an arcade at some exhibition, both on account of its size and its bareness. It was an immense place, built out from the rest of the bungalow as if to allow of more room, though evidently in no hope of custom, for there were but five small tables in all its desert space. These were spread with coarse cloths and such table cutlery as should suffice to take away a diner's appetite. Mrs. Lewin made a face at her dingy pewter, and amused herself with looking round the walls for distraction.

There was nothing to be seen but some dilapidated fans and a square of coloured muslin on a stick which bore some far-off resemblance to a flag. Outside the three or four long doors the day was still lingering among the creepers and shrubs on the stoep, for green things seemed to flourish there in tubs, and three dirty basket-chairs converted the place into a popular lounge. It was infinitely forlorn. Chum looked away again, towards the waiter this time, and observed that he was trying to attract Ally's attention, which was just then riveted upon the fowl's iron joints.

"Ally," she said, "I think Ah Sin wants to tell you something—he's either going to have a fit, or it's Anglo-Saxon attitudes!"

Lewin turned round quickly, to find that the Chinese waiter had come to his elbow, evidently with some more important news than the next course of a bad dinner. The guests at his table were lunatics to the mind of the Chinaman, who could not use his name of Chung Low, but must needs call him by some one else's. Furthermore they joked and laughed like children, and made comments on their surroundings and on himself which were nonsense, and which should not alter a line of his outward imperturbability.

"What is it?" said Lewin impatiently.

"One piecey man he come see you!" said Chung Low without a crease of expression in his yellow face.

The corners of Chum's mouth lifted deliciously. Ally dared not meet her eyes across the table.

"Which piece of him, Ah Sin?" she said, leaning her chin in her hands and looking gravely at the Chinaman.

"Chum!" said Ally warningly, under his breath. Indeed he was choked with laughter. "Er—you

can show him in, boy!" he added, with a rather larger manner than usual to impress the Celestial, and Ally was never very condensed. "I expect it's one of the fellows from barracks come down to see if he can do anything," he added vaguely to his wife. "People are generally so deuced friendly in a station like this that it becomes a bore. Might have left us to our dinner, anyhow, such as it is. Still we can't say no—can we?"

"Of course not. Besides, I want to see if he is whole!" said the irrepressible Chum. "Here comes Ah Sin—bowing before a young man who looks all teeth!" (Chum could see the advance along the stoep of the hotel, to which Ally had his back.) "Now he is making Anglo-Saxon attitudes before him. Oh, Ally, do get up and meet him first—I know I'm going to laugh! . . . *Well!*"

The last exclamation was due to the fact that Ally had risen at her desire, but no sooner did he see his visitor than he made a stride forward to meet him, and the visitor being equally impetuous the next few seconds presented a confused babel of greeting to Mrs. Lewin's amazed eyes and ears.

"Hulloa, *Bristles!*"

"Why, it's old Ally Sloper!"

"What luck blew you here? You're not with the regiment—the Wessex?"

"Yes I am. Changed from the Rutlandshire after the African show. Not seen you but once since Sandhurst, Ally—are you our new A. D. C. to Gregory's Powder?"

"Yes, worse luck! This is a nice beginning—no quarters, and obliged to bring my wife to this sort of shanty! Oh, Chum—this is an old pal who was at Sandhurst with me. Captain Nugent—Mrs. Lewin."

One of Ally's most salient characteristics was

that he could use slang and remain a gentleman. As she shook hands with his friend Mrs. Lewin inwardly commented upon the fact that the same indulgence would convert Captain Nugent into a coster. He stared at her with eyes which were burnt by much foreign service, and seemed to approve of the survey.

"I heard that a Captain Lewin was coming, but never thought it was you," he explained. "Fact is, I came down to see if you were too tired to come to the Gunnery, to-night—there's a scratch dance on, and, of course, as we didn't expect you till to-morrow, we couldn't send you an invitation."

"What's the show?" said Ally lazily, as he lit a cigarette. "You fellows?"

"No, the town cricket team. We had a match this week, and they got up this hop as a finish. It's only a small thing, so you might waive ceremony and come!" He looked at Mrs. Lewin's promising young figure as a man might a horse he means to back.

"Are you too tired, Chum?" Ally said doubtfully.

"I am never too tired to dance," said Mrs. Lewin with refreshing cordiality. "Wait till I get into something less dinnery. I was afraid to before, because it wouldn't get dark and let us have candles. There is nothing so disreputable as dining by daylight—it makes one feel *décolletée* in the highest gown."

Both men laughed as she vanished through one of the endless doorways. Then there was a silence of some seconds while the cigarette smoke rose in meditative threads. The man who thinks while he smokes draws slowly, but if he is actively employed he produces little woolly clouds.

"You're married too, aren't you?" said Ally, looking across the table.

"Yes; left the missus at home. She isn't strong enough for this place." Captain Nugent's burnt young eyes looked away from his friend as he spoke.

"Any family?"

"One," said Nugent, knocking the ash on to the bare boards of the floor to the inconvenience of the ants who lived there. "It's a tom!" he added thoughtfully.

Another pause.

"D'you remember, we both vowed we'd marry widows rather than a raw girl?" said Ally in reminiscence. "By Jove! How I wished I had."

"It's cornery at first. My wife told me what struck her most was that I came in to speak to her in my shirt-sleeves, and without thinking took up one of her brushes and brushed my hair. She thought, 'What cheek!'"

"Well, there's one thing that stumps me now," said Ally.

"I know what you're going to say—she buttons her gowns from right to left."

"You've seen it too? Why the devil do they? All our clothes go from left to right. I believe it's that that makes women always look at a thing hind-side before—their very point of view grows topsy-turvy."

"Ally!" came Mrs. Lewin's voice from the doorway. "Come and change your coat—you can't dance in a jacket. Captain Nugent, how are we to get there?"

Both men rose rather guiltily. "I am afraid you'll have to ride, Mrs. Lewin?" Nugent said. "Ponies, y'know. Every one does here. Can you

turn up your skirt? I'd get you a buggy, but there are only three in Port Victoria, and they are all hired for to-night."

"Elementary, but exciting," said Chum calmly. "Go and get me a pony, that's all, and I'll show you."

She was as good as her word when the ponies came round; they were rats of things, and the new lady's saddle which Mrs. Lewin had brought out looked astonishingly big on the animal assigned her. But she tucked up her silk skirts as if to the manner born, and the procession clattered off from the front of the hotel, audienced by half-a-dozen Chinese, loafers of three dusky races—for Key Island has a mixed population—and some lean hen. The darkness had come at last, but out of the irregular wooden houses shone the electric light with the bizarre effect it always produces in such elementary places. The ponies shambled along at a miniature canter, and Leoline gripped the pommel by habit with a dreamy remembrance that some time since she had set a thoroughbred across the finest hunting country in England. Such things seemed to belong to another life, with the smell of eucalyptus and moonflowers coming into her nostrils on a warm, wet breeze, and the glimpses of Port Victoria by electric flashes. They rocked down the main street, and for an instant the quay was on their left before they turned up-hill to their destination; again she saw the grouped ravenala palms, the huge wharves, the bay, and the grim Gates at the harbour mouth, black sentinels against the darkening sky. Then Captain Nugent steered to the left, along a bad road where anything but a Key'land pony would have stumbled, and suddenly they emerged into the most wonderful avenue of cocoanut palms, with soft sand underfoot, and as if

by common consent the up-hill canter changed to a hard gallop.

"Look out!" Nugent called, pulling in beside Mrs. Lewin. "This is Mitsinjovy Straight, the only bit of flat land round about. They always gallop here; mind!"

It was difficult to talk going at that pace, the wind buffeting them with such violence. Mrs. Lewin looked along the aisle of straight stems, each with its crown-tuft far overhead, and said, "I like it!" It seemed to her the most characteristic spot in all the island, from first to last—that wonderful avenue of cocoanuts where the ponies were so glad to gallop!—and she was half regretful when they pulled up before an old sugar factory beyond the palms, a white, hoary-looking building, evidently converted from the sugar industry to other uses now-a-days.

"This is the Gunnery," Captain Nugent explained. "It's the Gunners' mess until their quarters are finished. The men will take your pony, Mrs. Lewin."

Chum found the dressing-room full of women, lingering to gossip with the assurance of already filled programmes. Powder-puffs were going vigorously, and the place was stuffy with wraps. She tossed her cloak to an attendant, and rejoined her escort, who awaited her at the ballroom door. Nothing of the old sugar works remained, only the shell of the barn-like building served now as a shelter in which the gentlemen of the Royal Artillery could dine.

It was as Nugent had said, a scratch dance, and the Gunnery had not even been decorated, but the floor was unexpectedly good, and the Wessex had arranged a band of a sort on a rough staging. Below this impromptu daïs stood several people at

whom Mrs. Lewin looked at once, with an instinct for those of mark. There was a tall man with thick silver hair, and a stout woman in black, a jovial-looking parson, and another man with his back to her, of whom she could not judge. Nugent's eyes followed hers.

"Those are the Seats of the Mighty there," he said. "The parson is Archie Lysle, our chaplain (best fellow goin'!); the lady's Mrs. White, and the grey-haired Johnnie is her husband—he's Attorney-General."

"Who's the other man?" Ally asked.

"Halton, the Commissioner. Gregory's Powder half promised to turn up, but he went off to the Tsara Valley yesterday morning, and I don't expect he is back. Halton is probably representing Government House."

"I can't understand this place," said Chum, knitting her brows. "When the Government took over Key Island from the British African Island Company ——"

"Limited!" Ally put in significantly.

"Limited,—why did they send out an Administrator *and* a Commissioner to enquire into the riots? Surely the man who takes the responsibility should be the one to find out what is wrong?"

"Well, you see, Halton's the drag on the wheel, and Gregory's the wheel itself. Gregory's a man who is always sent into a tight place, but unless they brigade him with a drag, he'd make it an absolute monarchy—he's a born slave ruler. So they put Halton in to enquire, and Gregory to act on the enquiry. See?"

"Oh!" Chum's whole thought was concentrated into the word. "And does that succeed?"

"Don't much know—and it don't matter either in such a beastly little corner as this. Can't think

why we bother about the place at all. Let France have it."

"But we want it for a coaling station, don't we; and it's the key of the Mozambique Channel!"

"You're thinking of the name—but Key'land takes its name as much from its shape as anything, or so they say. Besides, who cares about the Mozambique Channel? I don't know what Government is up to, of course—don't mind either, so long as I get out of this pretty quick. We've been here six months, and we're all dead nuts on getting away. May I have some dances, Mrs. Lewin?" His tone had brightened.

Chum looked at him curiously as he wrote his name on her programme, and in her own mind contrasted him with Ally, and found him vastly inferior. He could not even take an intelligent interest in his surroundings, and she attributed it to a certain curious formation in the back of his head. It was flattened on the top, but curved out from the neck too much to Mrs. Lewin's critical inspection. Ally, with a superior skull, would of course be more intelligent; but she did not realise that she intended him to be so by her own motive power.

"Would you like to know Halton? He's a very decent chap," Bristow Nugent said simply. "This is quite an unofficial affair, y'know. No need for ceremony. I'll bring him over."

He swung in and out of the thickening crowd towards the band, but the dancing had begun, and Mrs. Lewin's programme had filled with the men she had known on the troop-ship, and others who followed in their wake. The evening was half over before Captain Nugent fulfilled his promise and brought the Commissioner up to her.

He was a very quiet man in appearance, with

that instinctive colouring which in an Englishman is always called fair, but his eyes were a dark-brown, rather opaque, and had a trick of half closing while he talked. He looked about forty, and the lines of his clean-shaven face appealed to Chum as suggesting humour.

"I suppose you have not had time to report yourselves yet," he said quizzically; "and as a fact you are not due until to-morrow, so to-night's appearance must be regarded as a kind of provision of good things."

"There is no one to report oneself to, is there? I hear that the Administrator is not in Port Victoria."

"He is standing behind you—not a dozen yards away," said Halton quietly. "If you turn round as though suddenly struck by the attractiveness of the band, you will be able to look at him at your leisure."

Their eyes met, and they both laughed, while Mrs. Lewin did as suggested. There was no mistaking the Administrator, because he happened to be the only man near, and was walking towards them with Mrs. White, the Attorney-General's wife. Evelyn Gregory was peculiar rather than attractive, but more emphatic than either. He was considerably taller than most men present, and was of that spare build which made his dress suit look as if it hung over a clothes-horse.

"He seems as if he were only on a bowing acquaintance with his clothes, and was afraid of taking liberties with them!" was Mrs. Lewin's comment to herself. "Evening dress appears more inappropriate to him than to any man I ever saw. Not that he is awkward either—but he looks too tremendous for it!"

The Administrator was still advancing, and re-

vealed a long hatchet-shaped face, with an unusual overhanging width at the temples. His hair was reddish and cropped closely, and his features were cast in a rather savage mould, the mouth hidden by a huge moustache. His eyes were his most distinguishing feature, being nearly lidless and seeming to fill the whole socket, the effect being that of extreme far sight and almost cruel keenness. Mrs. Lewin was the more struck by their expression in contrast to the Commissioner's, but she could not see their colour, for he was looking straight before him, and speaking in what she at first thought was an intentional undertone to Mrs. White.

"I don't think you know Mrs. Lewin?" said that lady, who had been talking to Chum earlier in the evening, and now paused near her. "Mr. Gregory!"

As Chum bowed she was conscious that the Administrator looked at her, classified her in his own mind, and dropped the very thought of her. He lingered for a minute, expressing his regret that they should have been forced to go to the hotel, but he hoped their bungalow would be at their disposal to-morrow, and Mrs. Lewin discovered that it was his custom to speak in a rapid undertone like a forceful whisper. The curiously concentrated effect of this was uncanny. His words came below his breath, but not one of them was lost. When he had passed on, she turned to Mr. Halton with relief, to find him regarding her in his turn.

"I cannot think how you do it!" he said promptly.

"Do what?" said Chum, as they ensconced themselves on two chairs in a corner, as if by tacit consent. She made a furtive snatch at her mental attitude as she spoke, for, to tell the truth, she had been making use of that good gift of nature, her

eyes. Even in this brief few minutes she had found Mr. Halton responsive.

"You come here," said the Commissioner thoughtfully, "in a perfectly fresh and smiling gown. Yet you arrived this afternoon, and must have untrunked it, as you could not have worn it for landing." He glanced at her so daintily as to be free of offence; the pretty white shoulders were innocent of sleeve, and the shoulder-strap was generous, and hardly marred them. "I usually know the packed look of a new arrival, but you have upset my calculations."

"I am sitting on the creases," said Mrs. Lewin amicably. "They are all in my tail! By the way, Mr. Halton, are all the servants here Chinamen?"

"No; only at the hotel, and one or two houses which believe in them. They are not very good servants, though they compare favourably with most of the ruffians who inhabit Key Island. The fact is that no good Chinaman leaves China—the best will hardly go out of their own districts."

"What am I to do for servants, then?"

"I should advise your having Arabs. You begin to think that this is a tower of Babel, I see; but the fact is, we get Arabs from the Comoros, as well as Chinese labour, like the Mauritius, and unless you can pick and choose, they are easier to manage. You can have a choice of evils, of course. There is the African negro, who is deceitful and desperately wicked, Creole and half-caste (but they won't work), and even some Malagasy. Would you like a brace of Arabs to begin with?"

"Thank you," laughed Chum. "I suppose we shall begin housekeeping to-morrow, and I tremble when I think of my husband's sufferings during my novitiate."

"Turn him over to the club if he dares to grum-

ble; that will sober him. I will send you Abdallah and Hafez, if I may. You will find them two very average idiots. Make Hafez your cook and Abdallah your butler, and they will find you the rest of your household."

"You are much better than a registry office! But I feel I'm taking liberties with the Government."

"We are terribly unofficial in Key'land!" said the Commissioner, with a little grimace. "But a week here will tell you more of the place than any secrets I could give away. The fact is that the Home Authorities are spring-cleaning, and we are living on the stairs and in the passages meanwhile, after the manner of householders in such circumstances."

Mrs. Lewin had absorbed a fair amount of information even when she returned to the hotel that night with her husband. It was their custom to become confidential after a tour among strangers, and to exchange experiences; but they took different standpoints.

"I saw you talking to a red-haired woman," said Chum. "What was she like?"

"Oh, rather nice. She knows the Tavistocks—Indian people, you know. I was at the Pindi with them." Ally's interest in people was usually founded on mutual acquaintances.

"I thought she looked Army, herself. Who is she?"

"A Mrs. Churton. Her husband is senior Major of the Wessex and O.C.T. here. She is rather a smart woman, I thought." This was Ally's praise.

"But does she put all her goods in the shop windows, so to speak? There are people like that."

"Well, her hair was all right, wasn't it? And she knows every one here."

"Ah!" said Chum thoughtfully, letting down the masses of her own irreclaimable hair, which objected to being smart either in colour or fashion. "Then I hope she will come to call soon."

"How did you get on? And what did you think of Bristles?"

"I don't think of Bristles. But on the whole I didn't do badly. I was offered ten ponies to ride, three men are coming to call on me with their wives (not only sending their wives to call—it's a broader compliment), and the Commissioner is selecting all the rogues and vagabonds in the island for my servants!"

"The Commissioner! I thought it was the Administrator you were going to annex."

"I am feeling round at present. If I see that he is the right man to advance our fortunes, Ally, nothing can save him!"

"I am afraid you had better keep to Halton. I heard all round that Gregory's Powder is a stiff dose. Lysle—that chaplain fellow—tells me that every woman out here has had a shot at him, and never made more than a fleeting impression."

"If he sets up as a woman-hater, he is a foregone conclusion," said Chum scornfully. "He seemed on excellent terms with that stout woman, Mrs. White, though."

"He is on excellent terms with them all, and with no one in particular. He is absorbed in his work wherever it is, they say, and the worst of it is he's a slave driver. I'm going to have a lovely time of it!"

He looked so really rueful and impressed that Chum opened her charming eyes with a little laugh.

"Why, Ally," she said, "you are all making a little tin god of him,—and I can't think why!"

"He is the Administrator of Key Island, and a hard nut to crack. Perhaps that is why."

"My dear fellow, he is—only a man!"

CHAPTER II

"A woman and a cherry are painted to their own harm."—*English Proverb.*

To understand the overwhelming military flavour in the society of Key Island, it must be remembered that Port Victoria is girdled with the garrison, and that the garrison is stationary, whereas the cruisers only put in to coal, and at the best stay three weeks on one excuse or another. The naval flavour, therefore, is general, but indistinct; whereas one cannot get away from the smell of khaki, go where one will. On the right, as one enters the harbour, is Teraka, the Gate of Sunrise, and behind this, though unconnected with it, rises Maitso Hill with its solid quarters for troops; on the left Tsofotra, or the Sunset Gate, is flanked in the same way by the lower slopes of Mitsinjovy. When the Lewins arrived in Key Island Maitso was occupied by the Wessex, and the Gunners were in hurricane huts at Mitsinjovy, pending the completion of their barracks, which were to accommodate yet more batteries as soon as finished; add to this the usual percentage of A.S.C., R.A.M.C., and A.P.D., and the result is that from nine to twelve, when the men go out of uniform, Port Victoria is nothing but a parade ground, and every man at afternoon tennis looks as if he missed a stripe down his trousers. There are civilians, of course (Leoline Lewin counted three

that she knew after a residence of as many weeks), but they are not enough to leaven the lump, and so the social world remains Official and Military, and the aristocracy of the place are always those who are most ferociously Army. Mrs. Lewin had two great advantages, when she was introduced to the station, over most of the young married women who fought a mental battle for their rights before they established themselves in the uppermost seats of the synagogue—Captain Lewin belonged to a very much smarter regiment than either the Wessex or the Artillery hen at Port Victoria; and also, he was not attached to the garrison. Therefore Chum started with an insured position that could not be torn from her, and yet rivalled no other lady's. Incidentally, she was also much better looking than any other woman in the island, and she knew how to put on her clothes, which is a gift quite apart from possessing the garments themselves, or even the taste to choose them. When they had talked her over at the club, from the ripples of her pretty hair to her openwork stockings and American shoes, the married men did a shrewd thing, and waited for their wives to mention her first, while the unmarried went to call without waiting for Sunday —which is a great compliment, because by the law of Port Victoria Sunday is the day set aside for visiting, it not being etiquette to play polo or dance.

The Alaric Lewins took their married life as a huge joke, a point of view which speedily communicated itself to Key Island, who proceeded to laugh with them over the situation. They had been brought up together, Mrs. Lewin's father having been Alaric's guardian, and an admiration of Ally had been amongst the rudiments of Chum's education. At intervals Alaric had disappeared out of her life to Harrow, and Sandhurst, and India, always

to reappear a good deal handsomer and better mannered and more travelled. His view of life was necessarily larger than her own by forced experience; but the girl, left at home, knew more deeply by theory than the man by practice. At twenty-six a woman who thinks is in a very dangerous position if she has had no actual experience to reduce her ideas of life to the level of reality. But Leoline looked innocent enough of anything out of the common, when seen against the background of her home. Captain Lewin was much influenced by surroundings; he saw a solid position in the county, irreproachable frocks, popularity with men and women alike, and a coveted possession by others of his kind, while the unimportant item of a girl's individuality, which was the centrepiece of all this, he took for granted. Leoline, the victim of her own theories, found the relations between them hardly altered after the clergyman of the parish, who had hitherto behaved like a gentleman, said very rude things to her from the altar rails, for which he had scriptural authority. She congratulated herself that she was still Ally's "Chum," and made their interests one with a touch of comradeship in the wifehood. Her knowledge of the man she had married consisted in the fact that he was nearly six feet in height and well built, that he had a well-shaped dark head, and a handsome face, that he had always had good manners and appearance, and that they were excellent companions. Marriage to Chum, meant a certain amount of mutual toleration and avoidance of friction, whereby she called it a success. It seemed to her that she and Ally had done the same thing from their nursery days; they must certainly have learned all of each other that there was to learn by now. But in an indefinite future she believed that he was to do great things, because

she could not imagine herself the wife of a man who was a failure.

A week in Key Island revealed the inner workings of its life, as Halton had said it would, but the Lewins still knew different sides of it. Alaric's duties tied him to Government House as he had predicted, but he escaped to play tennis and to ride and bathe after the manner of his kind. There was an heroic effort at a polo ground too, but things being on an eternal slant in the island, the game had to be played on a gentle slope. Gentlemen of the home clubs, who swear at a daisy tuft, think of the pathos of this, and see how exiled brothers can follow the sport abroad! Leoline, by the grace of Hafez and Abdullah, was free early in the day, but squandered her liberty in reducing her house to order. She did not care to ride out to tennis much before the hour when her husband could arrive there also, and it even sometimes happened that she would for preference go for a gallop through the cocoanuts up and down Mitsinjovy Straight, so that he had got home and changed, and was at their mutual destination before her. This happened one day about a week after their arrival; Mrs. Lewin had ordered her pony for four o'clock, but the day clouded over, and the sky over Maitso was so threatening that she gave up her gallop and half hesitated about going to the further garrison. As, however, tennis was on at Mrs. Churton's this afternoon, and as Ally liked Mrs. Churton, she decided to ride up to Maitso, anyhow, and cantered soberly away, past the gates of Government House, and, leaving Port Victoria to the right, began to climb the hill.

It was a steep climb, and the pony sobered at once to a walk. No Key'land pony can trot—either he walks or he canters, and even that he does

in a manner peculiarly his own, using three of his legs to the distinct saving of the fourth. As Liscarton dug his toes into the dust and hitched his lean quarters upwards, Mrs. Lewin turned in the saddle and looked down at the view, which was gaining an indefinite fascination for her—the town, the harbour, and the gates. The two cone-shaped rocks had a threatening appearance to-day, with the low loose clouds nearly touching their crests, and there was a sullen light upon everything. Even the sun-soaked green of the hills cuddled round Port Victoria were draped with passing veils of rain that were being blown over them and down towards the town. It was not as yet wet at Maitso, though it had been threatening all day, and the Lewins' bungalow, being on a level with Government House, had also escaped with an angry shower.

"Shall we have a storm, boy?" said Chum, as she rode into the Churtons' yard and delivered her pony to a loafing servant. The groom nodded, and murmured an assent in Arabic or Malagasy—she had not yet learned to know which—but with so obvious a disbelief in the weather that she hastened her steps into the house in consequence. He was right, for the first large drops splashed on to the roof of the stoep, even as the butler bowed her into the drawing-room through one of its many doors; and the clouds darkened the day so that the carefully shaded room was really dusky after the outside world.

Mrs. Churton happened to be crossing the room, and greeted Mrs. Lewin on the way. She was of a type that wears the regimental badge as a waist-buckle, and seems proud of a weather-beaten skin as proof that she has followed the drum through many climates. Chum glanced at the hair that Ally had said was "All right," and saw that Diana

Churton had tightened a coiffeur in the *Queen* into a form entirely unbecoming to her face. Her instinct could not approve, but her judgment meekly followed Ally's.

There were many people crowded into the little room who would have spread themselves out comfortably upon the tennis courts, but thus condensed seemed to Chum too complicated to be greeted in detail. So she remained where she had drifted, near an open window, and watched the storm. It had begun to rain, as it always does there, with half-a-dozen great drops, like the first tears of a breaking grief, and then as if a window opened in heaven and an angry God threatened to drown the earth a second time. For some minutes it was impossible to hear anything but the shouting of the rain as it drove past; but after a few minutes it softened to a steady hissing whisper, and the conversation in the room behind her caught Mrs. Lewin's idle attention. She wondered what was absorbing the party, and turned to hear. Mrs. Churton had had a large volume in her hands when she spoke to her latest guest, which she promptly deposited upon Ally's knee—Chum had recognised his flat shoulders and oval dark head, though his back was towards her—and a minute later she gained the key to the mystery.

"My husband always takes about two hundred pounds worth with him for exchange," Mrs. Churton was saying. "There's the variation, Captain Lewin—see the difference between DIE I and II?"

"Oh, I've got this," Ally's voice chimed in. "DIE II has a clean engraved cut under the eye, hasn't it? But you've beaten me in shades."

"I can get ten pounds for that one penny on five stilling dull rose Barbadoes of mine!" broke in another voice.

"You're a specialist, aren't you, Mr. Lysle?"

"Yes, I only take the Portuguese colonies. A collector really has no time for more than one corner of the world, if he does it seriously."

Mrs. Churton laughed rather loudly. "I'm not serious enough to confine myself to one country. I take anything that comes in my way—the more valuable the better. Bute says he wouldn't trust me with his own common duplicates."

"Stamps!" said Chum blankly, under her breath. It was so long since she had helped to arrange those little coloured squares of paper in a fancy album with Ally, that she had not realised that the usual boy's hobby had grown up into Philately—a fearsome disease that ravages both Services all the world over. Not being a "collector" herself, she stood by in amazed amusement while the jargon of the cult rang across the room, until she became aware that Mr. Halton had appeared at her side, without her having known him to be in the room.

"Disgusting weather, isn't it?" he said, as they shook hands. "For those who want to play tennis. I am afraid the crops want water so badly that, as a government official, I must rejoice, however."

"Is rain wanted?" said Mrs. Lewin, with interest. "What for? The cane? I wish you would talk about Key Island a little, Mr. Halton!"

"Why?"

"Because it interests me. I have been trying to pump my husband for information all the week, but he is an unsatisfactory person, and won't explain things to me. When one understands a thing oneself, it is difficult to realise the ignorance of other people."

The Commissioner looked at her beneath his drooping eyelids, and there was some speculation in his glance.

"Perhaps he is like most Key'landers, and feels no interest in the island himself?" he remarked drily. "Most of the victims whom Government has chained here for three years think of nothing those three years but getting away!"

"Yes, I know they do; but it seems rather silly, don't you think? Why should people always live in the future, or the past, when it is really the present that matters? As I am in Key Island, I have a deep interest in Key Island—I belong to her, and every move of the Government makes me long to know their plans still more!"

"You should talk to the Administrator," said Halton, laughing. "He is the only man likely to encourage you. I must confess I have some sympathy with the people who hate this place, though I can't share Gregory's enthusiasms."

"Ah, but you are only a passing compliment from the Colonial Office, are you not? and we cannot expect to keep you! Major Churton told me yesterday that they would hardly spare you from more important places much longer. But why do you hate Key'land?"

Halton looked out of the window at the clearing sky. The rain had ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and overhead was the pure deep blue that Mrs. Lewin was beginning to associate with the place.

"It's a rat-trap!" said the Commissioner, glancing up into the hollow heavens. "One of the rat-traps that connect all the British Empire. And already the rats are beginning to run round and round and find no way of escape."

But the words held no present meaning for Chum's ears. She was listening half-idly to the scraps of conversation in the room behind her.

"I have got the Provincial issue for St. Thomas when they surcharged the two cents on three cent

stamps until the mail could get in with more of the current issue!"

"By Jove! that's ten shillings in the catalogue at least."

"Yes, old man, but it isn't in the market, as there's no price quoted for it!"

Then Ally laughed, and Chum smiled in sympathy. Ally's sense of humour was easily tickled, and his laugh was infectious. Mrs. Churton's metallic voice rang above the babel.

"Well, anyhow he had Zanzibar complete, and they say it's worth a thousand!"

"No, he hadn't—he couldn't get the one rupee unused slate, small second, after all."

"The only things to go for now-a-days are new issues—all the old ones are too rare."

"What's that Turk's Island twopence halfpenny on penny dull red, that Mrs. Ritchie Stern had from Captain Tullock?"

"Oh, a beauty! I offered her an old Pacific Steam Navigation stamp for it, but she wouldn't exchange."

"Nonsense! It'll be as common as Black English in a little while."

"Isn't that a lovely set—those Venezuelans! And do you notice that the over-print is different in just one out of the whole sheet? I wrote to the paper about it, and they took no notice. I'm positive there's a variation."

Five heads were eagerly bent over a square half inch of printed paper, while a chorus of indistinguishable argument arose that made Mrs. Lewin laugh out loud.

"I never yet met any one closely connected with the Navy or Army who did not possess a collection of stamps worth at least a thousand pounds!" remarked Halton drily, following her glance.

"And did they ever realise the thousand pounds?"

"Oh no, not personally. You heard their ingenuous remarks about catalogues and market prices! But then they never want to sell—personally. They know some one, however, who did so. It is generally Browne who had the *Taradiddle* on the El Dorado Station, unless it is Smyth of the 1,000!"

"I know so many men in that regiment!" said Chum sweetly, "and they are all such nice fellows, too! The Duke of Humbug's Own, isn't it?"

"Yes; and the regimental motto is, 'When you tell a lie, tell a good one!'—the badge, a chimera seen in a mirage!"

They had no time to laugh, because Mrs. Churton's voice was heard across the room, earnestly expostulating with Ally.

"The colours on the red Brazilian unpaid letter-stamp won't stand steaming. You had better try wet blotting paper."

"Oh, come outside!" said Halton impatiently, pushing open the shuttered window-frame, and holding out his hand to help his companion over the step. Mrs. Lewin followed him down the stoep and into a narrow path lightly flanked by logwood. Three ravenala palms stood sentinel outside the quarters of the O.C.T., their split fans looking like raised hands to her imagination. The ravenala is the "Traveller's Tree," and is tapped for water by enterprising tourists; but it is too common in Key'land to excite the inhabitants, who look upon it as any other palm. To Mrs. Lewin it had become somehow symbolic of the place, and she liked its solemn hands outspread above her head, and regretted that there did not happen to be a single specimen at the bungalow. Besides the

ravenalas and the logwood, the Churtons' quarters were singularly treeless, but they owned one of the three tennis courts in Port Victoria. Maitso and Mitsinjovy are not remarkable for flat spaces of ground, and the Churtons were esteemed fortunate. All the houses on Maitso Hill had been apportioned to married officers when the troops were first quartered there, and as the paths zigzagged up and down the steep incline, each sharp curve would reveal a small bungalow, until the long line of actual barracks crowned the crest. From a distance it looked as if one house were hung above another, tier on tier in the green, but a nearer acquaintance proved the garrison more rugged than picturesque. At Mitsinjovy the officers' quarters, being new and specially built for them, were of a more regular type, and proportionately hideous; but Maitso had been a favourite residence to the old planters, and when given over to the Wessex, they counted themselves luckier than the Gunners. Halton and Mrs. Lewin sauntered as far as the tennis courts, and there paused, looking down on the best view of Port Victoria and the bay that Key Island affords, while they talked in desultory fashion.

"So you are interested in Key'land!" said the Commissioner meditatively. "Have you seen anything of the island yet?"

"Nothing but Port Victoria—and the docks!" said Mrs. Lewin, with a laughing glance at the forests of masts far off in the bay.

"I am glad you give the Government hobby its chance—but you should have said the Docks, the Harbour, the Coaling Wharves, and—Port Victoria! That is the correct order. We are merely here on sufferance, as Government House bears witness! Would you like me to take you out to China Town, I wonder?"

"I am sure I should—if I knew anything about it. Where is China Town?"

"It is on the other side of that hill,"—he pointed up the valley to an undiscovered inland. "It is the headquarters of the Chinese here, and we suspect at the root of the mischief. They have got some place where they brew this abominable form of hashish which sends the ordinary native mad, and makes him get up riots and kill white people—you see? But as yet we have not absolutely spotted John Chinaman brewing in any large quantities, and we cannot condemn on isolated instances. You are really interested, Mrs. Lewin!"

Chum laughed a little, conscious that her wide eyes were alight with the absorption of the moment, and Mr. Halton laughed too. It was one of his chief attractions to her that he never paid her a compliment, or made a personal remark; and yet his quiet admiration was as patent to her as the noisy homage of duller men.

"I am extremely interested! Is that your theory as to the cause of the rioting?"

"The real cause, certainly. The oppression and low wage that was offered as an excuse is nothing to a logical mind dealing with these people. There are the innocent hemp-crops, and there are the wily yellow man and the fools of blacks. But as yet we have not the connecting link. They complained of *corvée* (forced labour), it is always the plea—but we complain of ganja with much more reason!"

"And do these people profess to cultivate hemp for export?"

"A Chinaman, dear lady, will profess anything—save the truth. It is all *pidgeon* to use his own universal expression. But if you will get up very early to-morrow—say be in the saddle by seven—I

will take a day off and expound the ethics of China Town to you, with spectacular views as illustrations. Will you come?"

"With pleasure. But can't you tell me—Ah! what a pity!"

The compliment contained in the genuine exclamation was perfect because impromptu. It was caused by the arrival on the scene of Captain Nugent, Mrs. Churton, and Ally, no longer talking of stamps but of tennis.

"Is it too wet to play, d'you think?" Diana Churton said to the Commissioner and Mrs. Lewin long before she reached them. "That's the worst of grass—I wish we had gravel courts like that stuck-up Mrs. Bertie used to tell us they had in the Cape. D'you remember her, Brissy? My husband used to call her pea-hen!"

"Was she stuck-up? I thought she made herself rather friendly,"—Captain Nugent's voice was equally strident to Mrs. Lewin's ears. "She was telling some story about the *State* theatricals very first time I met her, and Jordan coming on the stage dead drunk! Rather good tale she made of it too."

Chum began to see that she would have to like Brissy in spite of herself, if it were to be done at all. A sudden impatience of the chatter round her seized her with the tantalising glimpse of more exciting things to hear of from Halton. Five seconds later she changed her mental attitude, and condemned herself for her own lack of adaptability. It was one of her theories that the immediate thing was the one to grasp and develop as best might be, which mental schooling resulted in her becoming involved in a game of cat's-cradle with Captain Nugent, who was playing with a piece of string which had been tied round the stamps album. Brissy had no conception

of mental flirtations undermining even a discussion on hemp-growing round China Town; but he knew that if he got "fish-in-the-pond" his large hands would very likely touch Mrs. Lewin's in the manipulation of the string. Ally had gone to find their ponies for the return home, and by the time he reappeared the Commissioner had also extricated himself after his quiet fashion and started with them.

"Then you will come for a ride to-morrow?" he said to Chum carelessly. "I am going to show your wife China Town, Lewin—she displays such a flattering interest, that Government cannot afford to allow it to die for lack of cultivation. You were there yesterday, eh?"

"I was!" said Ally significantly. "The most beastly hot ride I ever had. You had better be careful what time of day you go, Chum."

"Mr. Halton says seven A. M."

"I wish the Administrator had said seven A. M.!" said Ally, laughing good-humouredly. "Instead of that he said twelve—at a minute's notice."

"He does not spare himself!" said Halton, with a shrug of his shoulders. "And he sees no reason to spare other people. Our paths divide here, I am sorry to say. Yours is the shorter cut, Mrs. Lewin."

"Good-bye till to-morrow, then."

She turned in her saddle, her face framed in by the Panama hat she wore for riding, her eyes in the shadow, a new shade in which the Commissioner had not yet surprised them. He reined his own pony's head round into the winding path that made a carriage-drive to Government House, while the Lewins rode straight on. Their bungalow lay only a few hundred yards further down the direct road, with a short cut through their own plantation to

Government House. It was by this private path that Ally went to his work every morning and returned—the click of the rough gate dividing the grounds being Chum's signal for the first luncheon bell; but visitors, or the residents of Government House themselves, had a half-mile of winding path and tangled green before they emerged opposite the long straight building where the Union Jack flew above lines of blank window-frames and the straight pillars of the stoep. There were two stories to Government House; it could accommodate some thirty people independently of servants, and the Administrator and Commissioner, alone in their glory, called it a useful barn.

As Halton rode slowly along under the palms he was hardly thinking of the ethics of China Town, being too busy in breaking the tenth commandment. He was a man who had always hankered after the unattainable, and been afraid to risk what he had for what he desired. He had seen many pretty women, whom he thought of regretfully as possible wives—after they had been married by other men. The old process was beginning again in his mind, but the outcome of it was merely a half-irritated remark to the Administrator across the *tête-à-tête* dinner-table.

"What on earth made you send Lewin out to China Town in the heat of the day? It's enough to kill a man!"

"There was no one else to send," said Gregory simply, looking up in momentary surprise from helping himself to fried banana. "I had a message for Burton. *He's* a good man if you like."

"And not to be wasted. It wouldn't matter if Lewin were used up, eh?"

Gregory shrugged his shoulders. "What on

earth did Government mean by sending me a Mediterranean Station man?" he said in his repressed tones. "Who am I to depend on when you go?"

"He may wake up."

"He'll play tennis."

"I have an idea his wife may push him through," said the Commissioner slowly, poking a hard-back beetle with his forefinger as he spoke. He was looking at the insect as he spoke, and not at his *vis-à-vis*. Gregory's lidless eyes were fixed on him, however, in their usual direct fashion. "She is by way of being an ambitious woman."

"Is she? I have no impression of her beyond the fact that she was talking rather intelligently to Churton, on one occasion."

"When was that?" Halton raised his eyes and spoke more quickly, still mechanically keeping the beetle struggling on his back.

"Two days ago, at Mrs. White's. I didn't speak to Mrs. Lewin, but I heard her talk." He was unaware of the fact that Mrs. Lewin had been conscious of him as an audience what time she quietly drained the O.C.T. for information.

"I think she has brains. She is more attracted by Key Island than its meagre diversions."

"Pity the girl isn't the boy, then!" said the Administrator cynically. "This thing that sweats through a morning as my private secretary, and then with a sigh of relief scrambles into his flannels, is cursed with the curse of Reuben."

"Your pet aversion. I think you might be worse off, myself. Lewin is at least a gentleman —and his duties include an A.D.C.'s, as well as a secretary's."

"Lewin has a pretty wife!" said Gregory bluntly. "That's all about it, Halton. I hope the lady will

be so shrewd as to see which side her husband's bread is buttered, that's all. I may get the report into some form if she makes him work." He rose in his usual irrelevant fashion, pushing aside the last course offered him by the butler, and tossed over some papers on a side table. "Ambroise had no news," he remarked.

"So you need hardly have slipped off to Port Albert!" retorted Halton. "I've an engagement to-morrow morning, by the way—I shan't be on hand to save friction between you and Lewin."

The Administrator opened his lips as if to say something; but the under-breathed words did not come. His hard eyes searched Halton's reticent face for a moment with intent, and in his mind he bore another grudge against his Secretary for having a wife who could make a fool of a Commissioner. Taff Halton was a clever man, too. They had worked together in Central Africa. The devil take all women!

"Mrs. Lewin," drawled Halton, "was wearing a blouse, this afternoon, of a peculiar shade of grey-lavender, which seemed like a reflection of her eyes. It's a pity you don't study colour effects, Gregory. You lose so much pleasure." He knew just where to plant his sting, for if there was one thing that Evelyn Gregory loathed it was dilettantism. Halton's sleepy eyes saw the curbed impatience in Gregory's face, and he dropped back in his chair so happy that other relaxation was forgotten; and the hard-back beetle, no longer kept helplessly clawing the air, crawled away, and immediately married a lady he discovered in the shade of a dessert dish. All grades of life are elementary in Key Island.

CHAPTER III

"No maker of images worships the gods; he knows what they are made of!"—*Chinese Proverb.*

"I AM not sure that I am not making a mistake!" said Chum to her reflections, as she tied her tie in severe perfection, and pinned on the Panama hat. "If I could only get hold of the real man himself, I am sure I could do something. After all, Mr. Halton is only the shadow—he will pass as shadows do, and his influence cannot really push Ally."

She took up her riding-whip slowly, and stood a minute in thought. It was ten minutes to seven, and she could afford to arrange her ideas. On the dressing-table stood the tray with her early coffee, but Ally must breakfast alone this morning; she did not expect to get back from China Town till then. The room was very large and very airy, for furniture is superfluous in Key Island, and the lack of it increased the sense of size. The bare boards were not even polished or stained, and only two African goat-skins were thrown down as rugs to break its monotony; there were basket-work chairs and a lounge from Madeira, and a bed draped with a mosquito curtain with the usual bridal effect. The window-frames were many, and were filled with shutters turned to let in the air, but not the sun, and there was a door with the same contrivance in its upper panels. Outside the windows

ran the wide bare stoep carefully clear of creepers, because vegetation means mosquitoes, which need no encouragement. Chum fretted over the bareness, for her hammock was slung there, and she would have liked to swing in a bower of flame-colour and rose and greenery, which is to be had for the asking in the island. But common-sense was triumphant over sentiment, and the stoep was comparatively flyless.

Common-sense was just then fighting for the upper hand in Mrs. Lewin's mental attitude, and her pause with the riding-whip idly tapping her skirt was the result. It was easy, to say nothing of being pleasant, to go on as she had begun, with the garrison quite ready to follow in her train, and the Commissioner to lend it a certain distinction. But it meant no future good for Ally, and Leoline Lewin had, without admitting it, begun to see that if Ally went up the ladder somebody would have to push him rung by rung.

"Mr. Halton is so much more interesting!" said inclination.

"The Administrator has the real power!" said reason.

It was all the harder because in the one case she knew herself sure of success, and in the other she saw probable failure—and Mrs. Lewin disliked failure. Every woman in Key Island had made tentative efforts to bind Mr. Gregory to her chariot wheels, and had quietly drawn back without a hint of her defeat, after the manner of her sex. The only difference to Mrs. Lewin's case was that she really wished to interest Mr. Gregory in her husband and not in herself; but she could not hope that this would make her any more successful.

"Besides, he must begin by liking me, and being interested in me, though he doesn't know it," she

said to herself candidly. "And at present he simply does not know that I exist. Well, perhaps China Town may prove useful—some day."

She went across the house to her husband's dressing-room, where he had slept in order that her early rising might not disturb him, and looked in before starting. Alaric was lying with his arm thrown up above his head, in a boyish fashion that made him seem very young in spite of the manliness of the bronzed dark face, and the thick moustache on his upper lip. Chum bent down and ruffled his hair rather fondly, and he sighed in his sleep and turned over, but did not wake. There was a shadow of vague yearning in her eyes as she turned away and went out on to the stoep. Marriage had touched her lightly, but this was one of the rare moments when she felt a craving after something more satisfying—something that might even be welcome pain if it were only less ephemeral.

The morning air was brisk compared to the general laxity of Key Island. Mrs. Lewin mounted the pony which the sais held for her, and rode away through the listening day, with her senses equally alert. For it seemed at this hour as if everything had ears, or a keener vitality that looked for new experiences. Even Liscarton trod daintily, and sidled through the gate into the highway, pretending that he saw bogies among the ragged fans of the bananas. Where the path dipped down into Port Victoria the hoofs of a second pony became audible, and a minute later the Commissioner overtook her and drew up alongside.

"You are before your time, Mrs. Lewin; I meant to pick you up at your own gate," he said gaily. He also seemed in unusual harmony with Nature. "Isn't it worth while to rise early and get the spring of the morning into one's system? I feel like that

charming person in Scripture who 'walked delicately,' though I am afraid he was hardly a model to copy in his after-history."

"Agag, wasn't it?" said Chum. "I always felt I should have liked to follow his career a little further, but one never gets a chance. Do you notice how very badly they tell a story in the Bible? They have no idea of keeping back the end of the plot. 'Now Ahab was fallen sick of the sickness whereof he died,' they say, and, of course, as you know what is coming, it seems superfluous to read any further."

"In fact, you don't care about Ahab unless he is going to live."

"I never did care for the pawns in the game who are sacrificed. It is the big pieces who accomplish the struggle, whether they do ill or well, who interest me. I feel that they have made something out of life, instead of life making something out of them."

"And yet there can be no attainment without self-sacrifice," said Halton quietly.

They were riding through the little town, sometimes in the shadow of the unruly palms, which waved like banners over the low wooden houses, sometimes in the new-born sunshine. There were a few natives about, but no white people. At the hotel a single disconsolate Chinaman was flapping a cloth on the stoep, and Mrs. Lewin looked up, remembering her first night there, and laughed. Discomforts passed by her easily at present. By and by the ponies began to ascend the further hill which circles the back of the town by a zigzag path, and it seemed that the little white houses and the blue bay fell gradually below them, until they topped the ridge and drew rein a moment to breath their mounts before they began to descend on the

other side of the hill called the Pass. In Africa it would have been a "Nek," for it really connected Maitso and the lower heights of Mitsinjovy, but Key Island has not caught so much of the Dutch influence.

"Are you afraid to canter?" Halton said. "Your pony does not seem blown."

"He is Captain Nugent's pony, and you probably know his capacities better than I. He danced when I set off, but the hill has sobered him—however, we can soon see. Come up, Liscarton!"

The game little chestnut stretched his neck to the loosened rein, and broke into the rocking Key'-land canter. There was a rough, tangled path before them, and a gradual descent, but the ponies were used to it and took it with a sober joy. As the second valley opened before them Mrs. Lewin saw the draped hills and the patches of liquid yellow-green that meant cane intermixed with the darker hemp, and as they rounded a curve of the track they came suddenly in view of a tiny native settlement.

The Commissioner drew rein. "I'm not going to take you absolutely into it," he said, "but that is China Town. It is suspected of yellow fever just now, and a man has died—it is probably only billiousness though. The doctors are always quarrelling about the two."

It looked the happiest and most innocent little spot on earth—far more innocent than Port Victoria, with its ominous wharves and coaling jetties for the sea traffic. There was even a little pagoda to one building, and tiny blue-coated figures were moving about busily, looking like a new kind of ant from the distance of the hillside. Most of the huts were thatched with reed, and the whole village was little more than a scattered group.

"Do you see that larger house apart from the others?" said Halton, pointing across the valley. "That is where Burton, the Town-warden, lives. He is Gregory's right-hand man out here, and watches the place like a sleuth-hound."

"It seems impossible that anything could be hidden there!" Mrs. Lewin exclaimed involuntarily. "Why, there is nowhere to hide it!"

"Nevertheless they very successfully have hidden their source of murder," said Halton dryly. "That large barn-like arrangement is the sugar factory, but you cannot very well distinguish it from here. Unless they manage to conceal their evil brew there it must be done in their own houses."

"And is it really so serious an evil?"

"It caused the death of some eighty white people, indirectly. The rioters were mad with drink—with this hashish—and they rose with a suddenness no one could foresee, because it was unpremeditated on their own part. Let a native get drunk on hashish and he goes out to kill. There were no regular troops here in the time of the Company, only a police force officered by men lent by the War Office, and these gentlemen appear to have been mostly on leave, shooting in Madagascar."

"But how were the rioters armed?"

"They broke into the houses and armed themselves. The favourite weapon was a razor bound on to a stick, with which they jabbed upwards, but no kind of knife was despised. The most appalling thing was when they made a kind of torch out of the half-worked hemp soaked in oil and set their victims alight—am I frightening you, Mrs. Lewin?"

"No—but I have a very vivid imagination. I can see it all, and it turns me rather sick. Did the Chinamen fight too?"

"A few, though the worst offenders were the half-castes and the Malagasy. The Arab is as great a coward as the pure native, so that part of the population were comparatively harmless. There was a good deal of carnage among the planters and residents before the police got the upper hand, and the consequence was that Government had to step in and take over the island to reduce it to order."

"Whence followed a Commissioner to make enquiries, and Mr. Gregory to teach them a lesson. Did he teach them, by the way?"

"I believe he did—a slight one," said Halton briefly. "I arrived on the scene a week or so later."

"I wonder the Government puts power into his hands, considering that they always seem to have to censure him afterwards," said Mrs. Lewin musingly.

"It is rather difficult to ignore a successful man," said Halton, "even the British Government find that. And he has been most uncomfortably successful on several occasions, though his measures may have been drastic."

"I see. You generally come out a week or so later, I suppose?"

"It is the one boon I wring out of the Colonial Office; but I am speaking confidentially, Mrs. Lewin. You happen to know these things because you are here and in touch with them. At home they know little, because Mr. Gregory has quite a prejudice against the Press."

"They might hinder him, but I doubt anything really stopping his drastic measures, as you call them." A memory of the Administrator's face rose before her like a revelation—the overhanging brows and forehead, the savage, lidless eyes, the secretive

mouth, that lurked under the ragged moustache. Above all, the voice that spoke under his breath seemed to her ominous. Here was a strong man, not afraid to do lawless things and call them law by his own authority. Her blood tingled a little with the thought. "How they must hate him!" she said. "How weaker men must long to tie his hands and make him pay for proving them his inferiors, in action at least!"

"If we could tax success it would no doubt be a popular measure with the majority—who have not succeeded."

There was a flash of appreciation in Mrs. Lewin's eyes, but all she said was, "The lighter green is the cane, I suppose?" in an irrelevant tone.

"Yes, but this is a small crop compared to a big sugar estate—Denver's, or the Tsara Valley crops, for instance. There is no considerable hemp-growing in Key'land, and we wish there was none at all. There it is at present, however."

He pointed with his whip, and her eyes followed and distinguished the two plantations. The hemp was thinly sown, as it always is for intoxicating purposes, whereas when honestly cultivated for fibre the plants are crowded together. It was not yet in flower, for the sowing was in October or November —the spring of the Key'land year, the Tsara of Madagascar. The young plants stood stiffly, and were branched even to the roots; from the distance where Mrs. Lewin and Halton had paused it was just possible to distinguish how far apart the plants grew, unlike the unbroken sweep of the sugar-cane. The crop was always sown on higher ground too, generally on the gentle slope of the further hills, for hemp does not love a low level. The dark green of its wide leaves contrasted boldly with the

lighter cane, and made a pleasant patchwork of the valley.

"They don't pull the male flowers until January, and the female a month later," remarked Halton, looking across the wicked sexual hemp that flowered twelve feet high in Hashish Valley, for it liked the rich soil. "You know, of course, that it has two genders."

"And then?"

"Then it is converted, ostensibly, into ropes, and food for small birds, and other innocent and useful things, in that hemp mill down there. Now, Mrs. Lewin, you are looking at the sugar factory."

"I am not, indeed; I can see the mill quite plainly. And I suppose the Chinese really turn it into hashish?"

"Well, I suppose it is stolen and secretly converted into bhang or ganja first. I don't exactly know what form it takes here, but I've seen bhang, and its results, in India. So has Gregory!" he added significantly.

"I wonder they are not found out."

"It is so simple, you see. Bhang is only the dried leaves and stalks of the hemp, and if you heat it with water and butter I assure you that you get quite a surprising result! My own opinion is, though, that they are yet more diabolical down there in China Town, and dissolve the resin in rum; you can use any alcohol for the purpose, but the rum being at hand they would naturally take it."

"And then they dance the *carrab* dance. I remember the pictures in the illustrated papers at the time of the rioting. Ally—I mean Captain Lewin—says they were quite wrong, but I found them sufficiently impressive. I should like to be that man down there, nevertheless—Burton, did you say

his name was?—who is working with Mr. Gregory. I feel I want to have a hand in it too—to meddle, in fact. It has its advantages, being a man, though I seldom see them."

"I thought that to be a pretty girl was the height of bliss," said Halton, with his gentlest insinuation.

"So it is, until you meet with a prettier, perhaps," said Chum. There was a flash of mirth in her eyes, and the deeper drift of the conversation passed away like the shadow of the clouds over the sugar-cane.

"I suppose we ought to turn back," said Halton regretfully, as the sun's warmth began to increase to undoubted heat and glare. "If I bring you home in the trying part of the day I shall expect to hear of it from Captain Lewin."

Chum had loosened her rein, and Liscarton, with his lean head stretched out, was cropping an early breakfast on the hillside. Liscarton was always hungry—his sais calls it greedy—and the instant his rein was relaxed, he would wrench it through his rider's hands and nose the ground for something to eat. Mrs. Lewin had already learned that he had a will of his own that threatened to take the skin off her fingers did she keep his head up when standing; and she loved him none the less. She could forgive wrong-headedness, but she found it very difficult to forgive docility when it meant laziness. She sat easily in her saddle, her right hand resting on the pony's flank, her body turned that she might look down on China Town with those musing eyes that were green and dusk and lavender-grey by turns. And Alfred Halton watched her with fastidious appreciation, while by an irony of fate she thought definitely of the Administrator and his plans, and the ominous strength that was his attribute. A

man to have as a friend—a power to reach to high places—yes, decidedly an influence to have for you rather than against you!

"Have you noticed the names in Key Island?" said Halton, as they gathered up the reins and rode their ponies slowly homeward over the Pass.

"No, not particularly, except that I heard Mrs. Churton say she should go out to Vohitra if it grew much hotter. Where is Vohitra?"

"Vohitra is our health-resort—it is a big bungalow up in the hills at the northern part of the island, some two miles or so from Port Albert. Vohitra is a badly-chosen name, for it simply means hill. The place is shut up unless any one wants to go out there, but sometimes the garrison ladies make up a house-party, and then I believe it is pleasant, though there is nothing to do except shoot fish."

"How very unsportsmanlike!"

"Well, you can't catch them otherwise. No fly has ever been found that they will take. Can you shoot?"

"Yes—though I prefer a revolver to a gun. I object to a bruised shoulder! What language is Vohitra?"

"Malagasy. All the names on this side the island—the Madagascan side—have a flavour of their giant neighbour, though she is some two hundred and fifty miles off, except Port Victoria and Port Albert, which are strictly loyal, you will note. Maitso means 'green,' and Mitsinjovy 'look out' or 'see'; but," he added, laughing, "the Gunners' quarters have almost been renamed by White's little boy, who calls Mitsinjovy the 'By-Jovey-Hill!' and the name has stuck."

"How lovely! I do like the way children wrestle with names they don't understand, and turn

them into the sense that lies nearest. You said Vohitra was at Port Albert—I have not been there yet."

"Well, it is rather in the Tsara Valley. There is another lovely name for you—Tsara, spring o' the year! And the Volofatsy River that cuts the valley in two, means the silver river. I wish, for the sake of euphony, that Key Island had all Malagasy names; but on the west coast you feel the influence of Africa, and get Sand Bay, and Africa Point, and even the Little Zambesi."

"I like that—there seems some suggestion in it. But then I am rather inclined to like Key Island."

"So I am amazed to observe. You will forgive my wondering if it will last, or if you too will grow to look on it as a three years' probation to better things."

"And call it a rat-trap, as you did! I dare say I shall—and yet I cannot imagine it. The place seems to me too recently dangerous to be dull, and too possibly important in the near future to be ignored. And then one can always hope for one of Mr. Gregory's drastic measures, and a little excitement!"

"Do let me get home first!" said Halton plaintively. "You have never seen him through one of his shindies, and you don't know how fatiguing it is. I hope the Government will recall me while I can plead peace with honour, and give me an armchair in a quiet corner, from which to contemplate Gregory burning the hemp-crops seven thousand comfortable miles away."

For a minute Mrs. Lewin looked a little startled, but she did not comment on the suggestion, which was lightly made. Even her ignorance of the popular feeling and prejudices could not blind her to the seriousness of such a step as the burning of the

hemp-crops would be, and she wondered if the man who gave orders under his breath would have the nerve for such an incredible stroke. She also wondered why Halton had put such an idea into her head under the guise of absurd exaggeration, for she did not believe in his lack of motive.

"I am really very much obliged to you!" she said frankly, as they shook hands at her own gate. "You have appeased some of my curiosity, and given me a delightful ride before the heat." Her eyes met the sleepy brown ones that watched her so covertly. "I can't, of course, repay you ——"

"Unless you will let me plan another like excursion?"

"Will I not?" said Chum gaily. "Only try me! Good-bye, Mr. Halton—if you see my husband you might tell him not to be late for luncheon. There are granadillas and flying-fish, and he loves both!"

As he rode away Halton thought of the shady dining-room in the bungalow, the fruit-laden table, and the wife who thought of her husband's tastes and sat opposite to him in the cool sweetness of her white gowns. No one thought of his tastes, without irritated supervision, and he found Evelyn Gregory a poor alternative to the tall girl whose effect haunted his mind. He did not see her exactly in detail, as a woman whose inches looked more from her slight build, and whose hair was a warm brown, and her eyes as changing as

"The rare glooms on the far blue hills,"

but he said inclusively that she was charming, and her atmosphere left a blank in his consciousness when it was removed.

"Note from garrison," the Administrator said

briefly, tossing it across the luncheon-table as he sat down. "Mrs. Churton has a function of sorts next week. Gymkana, or some such foolery, at the polo-ground—she hopes we will refresh at her house."

"I can't stand that woman!" said Halton, fretted by a comparison. "She leaves a taste in my mouth like a cigarette that has gone out."

"It's your liver. Who hasn't a liver in this heat? My ideal, these days, is a clean tongue and a desire for breakfast."

"Mrs. Churton is forty," pursued Halton spitefully. "And she aims at three-and-thirty. A woman of forty is only tolerable as a background for her daughters!"

The Administrator looked across the space of white cloth and guavas—there were no granadillas!—with a grim line about the corners of his hidden lips.

"I hope you enjoyed your ride!" he said politely, with a suggestion of unappreciated humour.

CHAPTER IV

"A man's best fortune, or his worst, is a wife."—*English Proverb.*

THE telephone bell rang at eight in the morning, and if Ally were so disagreeable as to grunt and turn over on the other side, Chum used to get up and go to it herself. She was usually aggravated by the man at Maitso Exchange demanding of her if she were there, and then no further communication. He was the Hub of the Port Victorian Universe, and had become autocratic through bitterness of spirit; therefore he thought it just retribution to make sure beforehand that all the usual communication points were in working order before he actually had to connect them.

All the gossip of Key Island goes through the telephone, which is as inappropriate to Port Victoria as her electric light. It is the alternative for a post too, for the Planters, living some three miles out, have no other means of communication, and it is very much safer to make your own business arrangements with a fellow at Maitso or Mitsinjovy, or to order more soda water from Van Buren's Stores, than trust to a letter, even if you are only a mile from the post-office. When the Lewin Bungalow was connected, Chum usually found herself besieged with friendly enquiries as to how she was, and how Ally Sloper was, and a little conversation

ensued that was as strictly unofficial as all Key'land characteristics. She only resented it on Sunday, when English habit still clung to her and made her feel injured for lack of an extra half-hour in bed, but as Ally took more rousing than the time spent at the telephone, it generally ended in Mrs. Lewin walking into the dining-room bare-foot, yawning delightfully, and a wasted vision of beauty in *déshabille*, since the personality at the other end of the communication tube was only a voice.

"Well, who are you?" she said sleepily.

" . . . . !"

"Oh! well, Ally's asleep still—I should say he was in rude health, unless that suggests a liver!"

" . . . . ?"

"Am I ever anything else! And you saw me yesterday."

" . . . . !"

"Oh, the day before, was it? I'm sorry I forgot!"

" . . . . "

"If you are sentimental through the telephone, I shall ring off!"

" . . . . "

"No; really? We hadn't heard because we couldn't go to the Gilderoys."

" . . . . "

"Oh, they did, did they! People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. Who lost their way back from the Rano Valley the other night, eh, Captain Nugent?"

" . . . . ?"

"Oh, some one told me—I forget who."

" . . . . !"

"Isn't it true? Well, you needn't be so tragic over it!"

" . . . . ?"

"Yes, we shall come to church like good Christians. I'm going to ride Liscarton. By the way, when do you want him back?"

" . . . . . "

"Don't you think pretty speeches are rather wasted on a married woman?"

" . . . . "

"Perhaps you are keeping your hand in!"

" . . . . "

"I can't listen to any more—I'm too sleepy. Good-bye!—Ring off, please!"

At breakfast she said, "Ally, we lost a joke by not going to the Gilderoys. The Denver girl and Mr. Gurney went into the garden to find a ping-pong ball, and wandered on to the next door stoep by mistake (?), and didn't turn up till midnight. Can't you fancy Captain Gilderoy's state of mind when he had to go out and look for them with a lantern?"

"With Mrs. Gilderoy making her brisk little comments in the background! She has a dangerous tongue, that woman. Won't she give a fine version of the tale all round Maitso! Who told you, Chum?"

"Brissy—on the 'phone. He said a lot of pretty things to me too. That's what you get by leaving your wife to attend to the thing! I couldn't really hear," she added candidly, "but I could gather that he simpered, so I laughed too. It's generally safe to laugh!"

"I shall have to cane Brissy one of these days!" said Alaric, stretching out a shapely hand for the guava jelly. He had beautiful hands, and Chum noted them for the hundredth time as he did it. She always thought that they would have better suited a doctor than a soldier. "Are we going to church, Chum?" he said.

"Yes, I promised the Churtons yesterday. They want us to lunch there. We can ride up after service, can't we?"

"If you like. I suppose as it is Sunday there will be no Bridge—awful bore, isn't it?"

"If you think Sunday will warn Major Churton off his Bridge, you don't realise the man. I like the Major, Ally."

"He's a decent chap. His wife's the better horse, I expect."

"I don't think so. He looks like a man who would be any woman's master. If you notice, when he says No! even Di Churton can't say Yes!"

Ally laughed a little shortly, as if at some checked reminiscence. He changed the subject too, rather briefly.

"Doesn't Brissy want his pony back?"

"He said not. I wish you would buy Liscarton, Ally; I have grown to like him."

It was part of her adaptability that she could really earnestly desire the little Key'land pony, and enjoy his paces, after riding thoroughbred hunters and hacks that made other riders in the county envious. Leoline Lewin lived in her present, as she had said to Halton, and the chestnut pony had become the simple object of her equestrian ambition out in Key Island.

"There are lots better ponies," said Ally.

"Never mind! I like Liscarton."

"I don't think Brissy would sell."

"He's very good-natured," said Chum adroitly. She made no reference to the probable influence of her own wishes upon Captain Nugent.

"Well—I'll see." Ally rose and stretched himself, walking off to his dressing-room with shoulders square, while Chum admired him as usual. He

came out later immaculate in white breeches and linen coat, and seriously considered the problem as to whether he should wear a Panama hat or a white helmet, until his wife decided in favour of the Panama.

"I don't like helmets out of uniform," she said, looking over his shoulder at his good looks reflected in a hanging glass, with kindly pride. "And you are just as smart in the straw. Don't titivate any more, old fellow, or I shall think it is for Di Churton, and have to make a dead set for the Major to balance things."

Ally laughed a little self-consciously. There was more in Chum's speech than she knew—more than had been said at present. When the male animal is being flattered with attentions from the female, he may not glance at her with half an eye; but he begins to plume himself. Alaric glanced appreciatively at his wife's figure as Liscarton carried her to church by his side, and thought vaguely that she was a heap better looking than any other woman out there, and that they made rather a handsome couple. Then he thought that Chum reflected credit on his own taste, and then he remembered with some very private satisfaction that Di Churton had made a determined show of preference for him from the first. He did not really admire Mrs. Churton, save that he could recognize the swing of her own self-assertion in her position; he never thought of comparing her with Leoline in a single detail. But Alaric Lewin was as easily flattered as a child, and singularly manageable for a really handsome man.

The English church at Port Victoria stands a little above the town, towards Maitso. It is singularly like an enormous caravan, with six stumpy legs in place of wheels, and worshippers go up a

flight of wooden steps to reach its barnlike interior. Most buildings in Key Island are raised above the ground for fear of snakes, but the church and the native huts have wooden props rather than a solid foundation. There being no church at Maitso, or as yet at Mitsinjovy, the men were marched down to service by aggrieved and sweating subalterns, or a senior officer, and given as much room as could be spared from the civilians. Truth to tell, the military force had to take it in turns to be religious, service being held in barracks, by the chaplain, for the Wessex, when the Gunners came down to Port Victoria, and *vice versâ*. On this particular Sunday Captain Nugent and Mr. Gurney were bucketing their men into the pews when the Lewins rode up to the churchyard. Their sais had preceded them and took the ponies, hitching them up to the railings in the shade with native indifference, and dropping lazily on the grass to slumber away service time. Chum walked up the steps and into church in the wake of the soldiers, and sat down in her seat, drawing her habit round her and feeling the whole thing horribly unreal. Through the wide flung shutters she could see palm-trees waving tuftily in a splash of blue sky, and a gorgeous hibiscus had thrust a flame of blossom in at one aperture which was seldom closed. There was nothing to prevent the flowers coming to church, or the wild green things outside either, for the only glass in the place was the East window—a horrid picture of the Ascension, so quaintly designed that the figure of the Christ was cut off at the waist, the feet in red slippers hanging down into the picture, the rest of the body out of sight. Chum was always fascinated by that window, for she hated it, and the astonished faces of the kneeling apostles made her want to laugh. No wonder they looked as if they wondered

where the rest of the centre figure was gone to—and yet she had an educated horror of irreverence. Service, with the thermometer at 90° in the shade, however, was not at best a success. The soldiers fidgeted, and stared out of window at the palms, and Brissy Nugent pulled fretfully at his black moustache to keep himself awake. When the mumbling old rector concluded his sermon and the final hymn was given out, every one rose with relief, and high above the defective choir rose the voice of Hamilton Gurney, who was senior sub. of the Wessex, but was more remarkable for a tenor voice of unusual compass and power.

> "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,
> Praise Him, all creatures here below,"

droned the organ; but Gurney's voice, rising into the hot rafters of the church, seemed the only real religion of the whole ceremony.

"I wish I could have gone to sleep, as you did, Ally," said Mrs. Lewin, with frank regret, as they came out into the sunshine again. "I should have felt that it had done me so much more good if I had."

"Great Scot! the difficulty is *not* to go to sleep, when that old boy is meandering round about the Chronicles! It would be as much as Lysle's head was worth if he preached more than ten minutes. But he's a jolly good sort."

"That's that round-faced man who is regimental chaplain," mused Chum. "He always puts me in mind of a cherub out for a holiday."

The Churtons joined them in the church porch, Diana in a holland habit and white helmet, as near to khaki as might be. She annexed Ally with the boldness of a woman accustomed to stalk her game in the open, and Mrs. Lewin turned to the Major to

mount her, in no wise disturbed. They sat on their ponies for a minute to allow the men to pass, before turning to the bridle path that made a short cut to Maitso, and as the Wessex swung past her, Chum looked along the road taken by the moving helmets, and saw a solitary horseman stopped in like manner to themselves.

"Gregory's Powder!" said Diana over her shoulder to those behind her.

Besides the Churtons' and the Lewins' ponies, the road was blocked by Captain and Mrs. Gilderoy, an open cart belonging to the Denver girl, and several other people and their modes of conveyance. As he came full into a group that he knew, the Administrator per force stopped and touched his helmet to the party. He looked more at his ease in the saddle than in correct cloth at some Key'land function, as Mrs. Lewin had hitherto met him, though he rode with a loose-limbed carelessness that contrasted with the firm seats and carriage of the army men.

"How do you do, Mr. Gregory? Have you been to church in the open air?" Di Churton called across the last of the retreating khaki figures.

"I do not go to church, except officially," said the Administrator, without any softening of the assertion. "It is getting hot for ladies to be in the saddle, isn't it?"

"Well, you should order the services earlier," retorted Mrs. Churton. "I suppose your authority might do something even in that particular—officially! We are taking possession of your Secretary and Mrs. Lewin, who are coming up to lunch with us."

Something crossed the Administrator's face—a gleam of satiric memory to which Chum had not the key. But as his eyes met hers, and he saluted

again, she tried to hold them with an impersonal effort that had become habit to her.

"Where is Mr. Halton this morning?" was what she happened to say with a little smile, and she left her face, and her figure which was so at ease with her pony, to do the rest.

The gleam in Gregory's eyes became a silent laugh. "I don't know—I thought he was going to church," he said drily; and then he made a passing remark to Miss Denver and Mrs. Gilderoy, and rode away as if he had done his duty.

"Tarred us all with the same brush—a sentence a-piece," said Mrs. Churton, with a loud laugh. "Come along, all of you; the sun is going to be piping up the hill."

She reined in her pony for an instant to allow Captain Lewin to come abreast with her, and they began to climb up through the hill plantations of guava and palm and mango, the flickering of the light and shade touching the white riders and the dark ponies as they passed. Ally looked young this morning in his cool linen, and Diana Churton approved of youth. She was more than usually appropriative in her manner, having reached that stage when, like a good cricketer, she had got "set," and could trust to her attack. Behind them rode Captain and Mrs. Gilderoy, who were also lunching at the quarters of the O.C.T., and who had a devoted fashion of always riding with each other in public. Captain Gilderoy was Garrison Adjutant, and Mrs. Lewin had never met him at any social function, for he made his work an excuse to evade the monotonous round he hated. His wife used to say that she had worn out all excuses for his non-presence, and now told the truth—he simply would not accompany her. Nevertheless, he knew the life of the whole station, and commented upon it

with a freedom and bitterness which his hearers hardly realised on account of a very charming manner. He could say ill-natured things in a deep sweet voice, that slipped such poison into a hearer's mind without any disagreeable taste at the moment; but his rasping criticisms had made him the best-feared man in the garrison. His wife added the grace of wit to her own backbiting, and had a way of wrinkling up her face until her eyes were two dancing slits, while she turned a harmless incident into a dangerously good story. Together they had laughed away the reputations of half their acquaintance, yet it was difficult to locate their mischief through the light chatter that carried it.

Captain Gilderoy had struck Mrs. Lewin at first sight as an ugly man, but his voice was so free from malice, that when she heard him speak she thought she liked him. It was an impression she never wholly lost, only when he smiled he reminded her of a snarling dog, and it put her as instinctively on her guard as the actual animal would have done. His wife was one of the few garrison ladies who were on friendly terms with Diana Churton, partly because they clashed in no particular, and partly because it was Mrs. Gilderoy's policy not to quarrel. She was an unobtrusive little person to look at, with a quick manner, and a trick of saying apt things that Diana vaguely realised was attractive to men, and valued accordingly. She only priced women's gifts by their effect on the opposite sex, and though Mrs. Gilderoy had no flesh and blood pretensions, she had an odd attractiveness that increased with her acquaintance. Mrs. Lewin had felt this already, in the few times they had met, and was honestly glad that she was also lunching at the Churtons'.

The rear of the party was the Officer in Com-

mand of the Troops and Chum herself; but she rode with the bitterness of defeat upon her, so that she was less conscious than usual of her companion. Major Churton, for his part, was honestly admiring the beautiful curve of her figure from shoulder to waist, and the lift at the corners of her lips. He had found out already that Mrs. Lewin was easy to laugh with, and she answered the rein of his fancy as perfectly as a horse with a good mouth.

The air grew perceptibly fresher as they rose, but the climb was steep, and both horses and riders bore signs of the heat when they pulled up before the Churtons' quarters. Two or three servants appeared with noiseless swiftness to take the ponies, but Major Churton himself lifted Chum out of her saddle as easily as if she were a child. He was a man who loved his own strength. The party went on to the stoep, and the men promptly augmented their racing blood with stimulant, after the fashion of Englishmen. There is a particular drink in Key Island which is called Cého,[1] and which is taken before or after meals, as the fancy prescribes. It is not therefore the cocktail of the West Indies, nor is it the "Whiskey-up" of Africa, or the highball of America, or the universally styled "Drink" of England, which ranges from simple beer to the last frenzy liqueur. Cého is compounded of many ingredients, but the old seasoned rum of the island is its foundation, and strange juices from tropic plants go to make it an evil thing. It is always iced, and generally precedes a whiskey and soda, which it demands by reason of a tickled throat; but some

[1] Cého means simply "call"—the sarcastic inference in the native mind being that an Englishman's most universal call is for strong drink. There being no bells in Key Island a shout brings the servant—usually with the ingredients for a Cého, which order he takes for granted.

men, and these are hardened Planters, can take three or four céhos running in preference to longer liqueur, and do not die—at once.

Ally and Captain Gilderoy took céhos, and Major Churton a whiskey and soda, in which his wife followed suit. Mrs. Gilderoy declined and was overruled, and Mrs. Lewin rose and poured out the last of the soda water for herself without adulteration.

"Do you really like it alone?" said Mrs. Gilderoy, looking up at the tall figure. "Take care, Chum! my husband will jog your elbow.—Oh, I am so sorry!" she broke off lightly. "But it comes so naturally to call you that. It somehow suits you."

"Do, if you like," said Mrs. Lewin good-humouredly. "I expect we shall all fall into the Christian-name stage eventually, so why not at once? I am sure you all call my husband Ally Sloper—it is so appropriate!"

Every one glanced at Ally, tall and strong and triumphantly good to look upon, and there was a general laugh.

"Ah, but Chum isn't your name, and I know Captain Lewin calls you so!" said Mrs. Gilderoy, with faint suggestion in her tone.

"Yes, from nursery days. Ally never has called me anything else but Chum, because it amply defined the position. I don't mind other people using it a bit."

Mrs. Gilderoy half closed her eyes, and looked up with a glitter of laughter in them. "When you talk like that it sounds as if you had married your brother!" she said.

But Mrs. Lewin's smooth fair cheeks did not even flush. She was chattering with Major Churton over a gymkana next week, and a pony which she was to name.

"I think I shall call it 'Key'land Gloom'!" she said. "It expresses the mind of all the officials here so well. I have hardly heard any one speak well of the place since I arrived."

"Beastly hole!" said Di Churton loudly. "I wish they had sent Bute to the West Coast, rather."

"But that is a fever station!"

"Yes, and it's better pay and better leave. I shouldn't mind Sierra Leone for a bit—a good many women have gone out."

"I expect that will be my next job!" said Churton carelessly, as he set down his empty glass. "It's Paradise to this, anyway!"

"Oh, don't talk of this! I hate Key Island, and everything in it. Have a whiskey, Ally Sloper?" Di smiled at Mrs. Lewin to introduce the nick-name in public. Next time she would not take the trouble, while further off still she would say Ally without reserve.

"Better not, Ally!" said Chum, laughing. "I shall have to carry you home if you begin so early."

"That's the worst of cého!" said Captain Lewin apologetically, as he filled another tumbler. "I say, Chum, what a sweet sight for the Administrator if he met us tottering home arm in arm!"

"Speak for yourself! I've had soda."

"Oh, the day is yet young!" said Major Churton. "You may yet catch him up before tea, Mrs. Lewin!"

The whiskey and soda was finished, and Ally's throat asked for another by the time that luncheon was on the table. It was a light meal, lightly relished, in a room that had more doors and windows than walls, and of which the heavy scented flowers and the strange fruits seemed as inevitably

a part as the iced drinks. Chum had put Mr. Gregory on one side, and was talking to Major Churton consciously. He was a man who had been far and done hard things in strange lands, and she read the lines of it in his face, from the great square forehead to the self-reliant chin. It was not by any means a Sir Galahad type of face—Tristram or Lancelot's failings were more likely branded there; but it was a soldier's face for all that, and, despite the grey on his thick, clipped head, he looked what she had called him—a man who would be any woman's master. Strength attracted Mrs. Lewin in whatever form she met with it; she ignored the talk at the other end of the table, which had drifted inevitably to stamps, and gave her attention to her host.

"I am bent on mastering the intricacies of the sugar industry," she confided to him, while behind her shoulder she could hear Ally comparing the many different shades of the Grenada and Barbadoes star watermarked issues with Captain Gilderoy. "Is there a factory within my reach?"

"Denver's is the best. You know Denver, don't you? He was a great man in the old Company's day, and is still on the Legislator. He has the largest plantation this side the Pass, and it joins your ground on one side. You ought to go over his factory, if you are really interested in native industries."

"I wonder why you all find that so hard to understand? Ever since I arrived I have been met on all sides with weeping and lamentation, and because I do not join in it I am counted a fraud. Key Island seems a very possible centre of interest to me for the three years that one is stationed here."

"Wait till you have done your three years!"

said Bute Churton, as he handed her a cigarette. "I have had twenty years' foreign service, Mrs. Lewin, and I never wish to see a palm-tree again once I get quit of this. Give me solid English comfort!"

"Most people's idea of solid English comfort, and 'Home, sweet home,' consists in early Victorian furniture and all the meals an hour later on Sunday!" said Chum. "It gives me indigestion."

"Oh, but that is the 'Home, sweet home' of one's relations and old family friends—the sort of people that one only thinks about at Christmas and on their birthdays, in fact."

"No!" said Chum, firmly; "I never remember people's birthdays on principle. Sooner or later it is bound to degenerate into rudeness."

"That reminds me that there is a birthday dinner party threatening us next week, anyhow. Old Arthur White met me in the club and told me he was sixty next Thursday. They have a feed on at the Harrac. Are you going?"

"Yes, I believe so. Mr. Halton tells me that Harrac is one of the few houses where they know how to cook flying-fish, and you can trust to the Bridge being sound."

"'Bridge' is not my game, though I play it," said the Major, with unconscious self-revelation. "I like 'Poker'—one is on one's own there. I prefer to trust to myself."

Chum looked at his line of chin and forehead, and smiled. For a minute she wondered what it would be like to have a husband who preferred to trust to himself. Ally so infinitely preferred to leave the final decision to her! It sounded rather restful, and she glanced round half curiously at the man with whom she had linked her own fate—and power of making up her mind—to find him seriously

arguing with Captain Gilderoy that the Saint Lucia twopence halfpenny crown C. C. would rise in the market now that Queen's heads were becoming scarce. It seemed he could really concentrate his thoughts and energies on a hobby, anyway. She caught the beautiful curve of his earnest face with simple artistic pleasure, and then found Mrs. Churton waiting to make a move from the table.

"Have you finished your smoke, Chum?" she said carelessly as she rose. "Come into my room and freshen up. The men are good for more whiskey yet."

"I hope not!" said Chum, with a half-resigned, half-protesting glance at Ally, which slid harmlessly over his bent head and was lost among the shades of the Canadian two-cent map stamp.

"Didn't I hear you talking about Denvers?" said Mrs. Gilderoy, as the three women entered Mrs. Churton's room and drifted by mutual attraction towards the looking-glass. "You heard how Trixie Denver behaved at our house the other night?"

"Yes. Brissy—Captain Nugent—told me this morning through the telephone." She thought of Ally's prophecy, that Mrs. Gilderoy would make a story out of the incident, and waited with a smile somewhere hidden in her eyes.

"Oh, my dear, we had an awful time! My good man took a lantern and went to find them at last, for they had been out there simply hours! I told him he had better be careful how he turned it on—it was one of those electric things, you know. But he flashed it straight into the dark corners, and discovered them, to the mutual embarrassment of all three!"

"If some one doesn't look after that girl she'll come to grief!" said Mrs. Churton scornfully,

"Since she has taken up with the Clayton woman she has been nothing but a camp follower."

"Who is Mrs. Clayton?" said Chum, with some curiosity, but more of a desire to shift the talk from a girl's name. She did not care for Miss Denver, who offended her taste and vision alike; but Diana's comments were nearly as jarring.

"They are A.S.C. people—they have quarters at Mitsinjovy. She's the woman who was at Mrs. White's the other night in green. You could not have missed seeing her!"

"But I was not there. Does she dress so oddly?"

"She has one garment that every one speculates over. I fancy it began life as a nightgown, but she always wears it on unofficial evenings!"

"Be charitable, and put it down to the heat! Ally would live in pyjamas, if I would let him. What is Mrs. Clayton's garment like? Perhaps I might adapt my own nightdresses—with a sash!"

"Well," said Mrs. Gilderoy thoughtfully, "I don't quite know how to describe it—do you, Di? But if a bathing dress had a—a flirtation with a kimono, Eva Clayton's garment might be the result! I can't see how it would be obtained otherwise. It is certainly a hybrid!"

Her eyes became mere slits of laughter, and Mrs. Lewin laughed too, with soft, full enjoyment.

"I shall look out for Mrs. Clayton," said she. "She is out at By-Jovey, is she? I love that name for the Gunners' Hill!"

"Yes, and Trixie Denver goes over there half her time, and she and Mrs. Clayton sit on the steps of the Gunnery,—on the men's knees, I believe, as soon as it gets dark."

"I wonder they wait for that!" said Diana

scornfully. "What did Captain Gilderoy find Gurney doing with Trixie?"

"They were on the Jacksons' stoep—their quarters join ours, you know. Wray says that Trixie was draped round Gurney's neck, and he looked a perfect fool. We were furious, of course, as the girl was dining at our house, and in our care for the time, at least. Wray spoke to Gurney pretty plainly, and told him that unless he meant to marry her, he had better behave decently when she was with us."

"It is her fault, not Gurney's," asserted Diana, sacrificing the woman to the man with the instinct of her class. For she was a "man's woman," and would see no wrong in the sex. "What did he say?"

"Oh, he wriggled out of it—said he couldn't afford to marry. It is rather a pity for the girl, don't you think?" Her eyes glanced at Chum in the looking-glass, where she was powdering her face. Mrs. Lewin stood behind her, her taller stature enabling her to see over the little woman's head, while she watched a trifle satirically to see Mrs. Gilderoy wet her finger with her lips and draw it across her lashes.

"Wretchedly large puffs you have, Di!" she said calmly. "One's eyes always catch the powder and give it away."

"It's not a thing I use at all," Di Churton boasted, passing her handkerchief over her burnt and oozing skin. "How are you getting on with your housekeeping, Chum? I forgot to ask you."

"Very well, thanks to Abdallah. I must confess he does more towards it than I."

"Oh, you've got Abdallah? I hate Arabs myself. We've Malagasy and natives. Your servants sleep on the stoep, of course?"

"I don't know," said Chum, laughing. "It's their own fault if they do. There are servants' quarters."

"I bet you five to one they sleep on the stoep, and bring their women there too!"

"That goes without saying?" said Mrs. Gilderoy, relinquishing the powder puff for a manicure case. Whatever were Diana Churton's other drawbacks her hands were always immaculate. "When we had Arabs I never could go out after the house was shut up, or I fell over them on the doorstep, and—and it embarrassed me!"

"Brutes!" said Chum disgustedly. Her eyes grew stormy, and a beautiful red colour came into her cheeks, that were usually rather pale. "I will turn them out one and all, if that is the case."

"Don't be such a fool!" said Mrs. Churton scornfully. "If they are good servants, keep them. What on earth does it matter what they do? All the coloured people are alike—only animals."

She did not see that her broad judgment might apply to white races also, though later she went back to the stoep and her contemplation of Alaric Lewin. There was a certain grave dark beauty in Ally's face which was deceptive, because at the moment he was merely rather sleepy; but when the Lewins mounted their ponies again for the ride home in the short twilight, Mrs. Churton strolled over to Ally and laid her hand on the neck of his mount.

"If you can come up some time with your duplicates I'll make a fair exchange with you, for some of those Sydney Views you have," she said. Stamps are an innocent and mutual hobby. Mrs. Lewin did not collect.

"Thanks, awfully!" said Ally. The last whiskey that had been pressed on him at parting made him

feel that Di Churton was really a good sort of pal to have, and he moved the reins. . . . Di's hands were cool and soft to touch.

"Ally, I'm half-way home!" called Chum, laughing, as she steered Liscarton down the steep road.

The man gathered up his reins and rode after his wife, his hand delicately conscious of a soft touch still.

The woman turned back to the house, wondering if any one had seen.

Nobody thought of the Arabs on the stoep—but even such courtship as theirs must have a beginning.

CHAPTER V

"Man is fire, and Woman is tow,
And the Devil comes and begins to blow!"
—*Old Saw.*

It is not exactly good for any man to be a condensed force in his own person. An administrator represents a governor, who in his turn represents the Imperial Government and takes precedence of any stray royalty who may drift into his kingdom—provided he is not the figger-itself. A representative power is very demoralising, because the reins of government are too concentrated—in spite of the Legislative Council. Six or seven thousand miles away is Westminster, and somebody who is called the Colonial Secretary, and who can write letters with censure in them; but on the spot, in such rat-traps as Key Island, for instance, is an administrator, and this unit is for the nonce a king in his own country if he has the confidence of the men over him. The effect of this is seen when such transitory monarchs go home, and walk into the Colonial Office to demand an extra six months' leave. Then they learn their real importance, which is so great that they cannot be spared, and are sent back to their tiny kingdoms not at all appreciative of the compliment that has been paid them. A small corner of the British Empire is the very worst school in which to learn a sense of proportion; but Evelyn Gregory had been put in power in many of such

corners, and had learned to see things from a proper distance even while he lived in the midst of them. It was the more surprising, therefore, that he always impregnated himself with his kingdom of the moment, and that particular spot (whether it were many thousand square miles in the centre of Africa or Northern India, or only the limited area of Key Island) was the problem which absorbed all his faculties until he had made himself its master. The raging energies of the man demanded an object on which to expend themselves in such a way, and had been his quality of success throughout his turbulent career. It was a little hard on Alaric Lewin, who was cast in another mould, that he should have been appointed under a man who was a glutton for work, and suffer as an ineffectual tool. But the Colonial Office is no respecter of individualities.

There was a meeting of the Executive Council on the morning of the Arthur White's dinner; it was a small body, consisting of the Attorney-General himself, Bute Churton as officer in command of the forces, and the Colonial Treasurer, besides the Administrator. Gregory mounted his pony and rode down into town thinking of his plans and the future of Key Island, rather than of any social function, though he was to be one of the guests at the Harrac. He was not a dreamer, but his restless brains built fortresses where other men's built castles in the air, and he projected schemes for the Empire in place of personal ambitions. The little streets opened out before him and revealed the ring of the bay and the two great rocks guarding the harbour entrance, and the Administrator's keen sleepless eyes stared out through them as a lion's through the bars of his cage. With the smell of the sunshine and the tropic life in his nostrils he jogged easily along, mechanically raising his hand to his helmet

if any one saluted him, but seeing more of the sand-box and eucalyptus trees in the little central square where the band played, than of the people he passed.

If France developed the resources of Madagascar now, as this new interest in the Hovas seemed to indicate, that meant a spur in her trade, and more traffic with Africa. Nothing would have pleased Evelyn Gregory more than the least excuse for a quarrel if only he could have laid greedy hands on a portion of his huge neighbour. He knew Madagascar and her capabilities,—he held theories about the ore that he chafed to see neglected, —and he coveted her for his Government, who already found Key Island more trouble than she was worth. To turn his guns on the French ships as they came up the Channel, and be the base of British operations with the safe harbour and huge coaling stations, would have fed his fighting instincts and ambitions alike. He glanced at Tsofotra, the left gate and the more accessible of the two, where the guns could be dragged up somehow in case of hard necessity; and he felt a secret attraction towards those great sentinels, rising bare and grim to over two thousand feet above his harbour.

. . . A woman passed him, riding up towards Government House, the way he had come. He forgot the Lewins' bungalow for the minute, and half-wondered where she was going. She bowed, and he saluted, before he remembered that she was Mrs. Lewin, the pretty wife of his incapable A.D.C., who had better have been the boy than the girl. But her face only brought a memory of her husband to his mind, and made his harsh features a trifle less ingratiating than usual.

Why on earth had they sent him such a show

article as Lewin for the work he had before him! He wanted brains and energies, not muscles and trained animal courage—a man, not only a soldier. Gregory knew that as yet he had not his administration in the iron grip in which he would hold it by-and-by, and before casting a loving eye round the Channel,—Madagascar on one side, and Mozambique on the other,—he must make Key Island his own. The natives were cowed with the presence of the troops, but the root of the mischief was there still, and he had not yet probed down to it. He wanted certain things done, too, by the Home Government—the factories encouraged and enlarged, for he knew the value of sweating the devil out of his people, and minor industries, such as timber growing, giving a helping hand; there were memoranda to make, reports to send back to England, a mass of clerical work to get through before Halton was recalled,—and Captain Lewin was the best polo player that the club could get on to their faulty ground, and in constant demand for tennis and gymkana. Truly the fates were unpropitious for both men.

Chum had ridden on in the sunshine, thinking as hard as Gregory. He would be at the Arthur White's to-night, and he would talk of tennis and cricket matches to the best of his ability to the woman assigned him for dinner party, probably playing the part of courteous listener, if only she would do the talking—Mrs. Lewin was beginning to know his methods; and then, once the ladies had gone, he would draw nearer to the man who could really interest him, and talk of the island and the life there that woke him to more than surface attention,—but that man would not be Ally! No schooling would push Ally into the place she wanted him to take after her back was turned, and

she herself was helpless. With feminine philosophy she dressed carefully that night, not for the Administrator, but because Chum never despised the advantage of facing the world fortified by being perfectly turned out. She was more successful than usual over her unruly hair, and the pretty ripples lay round her flat ears—not over them, for Ally's warning!—and were massed down into the nape of her neck as if they loved her, and were glad to frame her beauty. She looked at the slope of her neck and the warm, white round of her shoulder, and because she was respectful of her Creator's work, she fastened a big, black velvet rose to the shoulder-strap, where its artificial duskiness kissed the reality of her own seductive dimples. More than one man found himself vaguely conscious of that false flower before the dinner was over, and thought stealthily of Captain Lewin's domestic bliss. Leoline was not exactly a woman whose influence was towards goodness, whatever she might be in herself. For though she had no vice of her own, she suggested all of them in turn to coarser and more masculine minds.

The Arthur Whites had placed their table well, and this is a great gift in Key Island, where guests are easily bored through constantly meeting each other. The host and hostess did not sit at either end of their square table, but because one side would accommodate almost as many as another they had a way of disposing themselves among their guests, and placing two instead of one at either end. It broke the usual solemn monotony of dinners, and accommodated a larger number. Thus it happened that Mrs. Lewin, who had been taken in by Captain Gilderoy, found that she was next the end of the table where her host should ordinarily have sat, but round the corner were the Administrator

and Mrs. White. To sit next to Mr. Gregory was nothing, for what attention he had to give was Mrs. White's. Chum smiled upon the garrison adjutant, and enjoyed herself with a continuation of the philosophy that had dressed her for conquest. Across the table she could see a woman, who was a stranger to her, neglecting her rightful partner, Major Churton, and talking at the Administrator through the medium of a projected water scheme in which she was not really interested, and noted her failure with as much sympathy as amusement. After all, they had all had their water-scheme trial, and failed also!

"Who is Major Churton's partner?" she said idly to Gilderoy, under the buzz of the conversation round them.

"That is Mrs. Clayton of Mitsinjovy fame!" he answered. "They have only been out a month or so longer than you, and she was ill with fever at first, so it took some time for her questionable attractions to dawn on us."

("Then she does not know Mr. Gregory, and that is why she is wasting her energies on the water scheme!" thought Chum.) Aloud she said cautiously, "Do you know her?"

"Not personally, I am thankful to say, but I have a smiling acquaintance with her. I have to pass their house on my way down to town and to the garrison office every morning, and she is generally showing her ankles for my benefit on the stoep. I always smile, because as she has taken the trouble to get into her hammock, presumably on my account, it would be unkind not to do so."

Mrs. Lewin looked at his rather rugged face, and found it curiously deceptive. For his eyes were quite friendly, and when he spoke in that pleasant tone it was difficult to realise his sneering insinua-

tions about the lady sitting opposite, who was even now casting glances in his direction.

"What sort of acquaintance did you say you had?" she asked, laughing.

"Just a smiling one. Don't you know that stage? I should say it was very inadvisable to go further and fare worse with the O.C.T.'s dinner partner!"

"Now I come to think of it I have had that degree of intimacy with people myself. It is rather fascinating, because though one can't bow it is not in human nature not to recognise a familiar face in some way that evades the social law. But why should you judge Mrs. Clayton by her ankles?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and the dog-smile marred his face for a moment. "If a woman gives me such a flagrant invitation, what am I to think? They have not begun entertaining yet, but if you would rather wait and judge them by their tennis-cake and Bridge-markers pray do so. For me, I have my private opinion."

"Is that the usual test out here—how one entertains? I am still on my probation then, because we have no courts, and have not started Bridge. Ally and I only give whiskey-and-soda dinners at present."

"Well, that is excellent, or sounds so!" he retorted, turning to look at her more closely. Captain Gilderoy always retained his air of being a gentleman whatever he said or did, but he was also, at times, a man—the black rose that Chum was wearing was on his side, not the Administrator's, and he was well content with his lot, so much so that when Diana Churton loudly claimed his attention to pronounce judgment on a short issue of Victorian stamps, he turned reluctantly to answer, leaving Mrs. Lewin for the moment unmonopolised.

The dinner was practically over, but there was just that pause of desultory talk before Mrs. White rose that kept the men from their cigarettes—in this house the women were, officially, not supposed to smoke—and Chum knew that her hostess would look at her in a minute, and altered her attitude to one of more alertness; but she had a school-girl trick of slipping off her shoes under the dinner-table, and for the minute the little right-hand slipper was missing.

She was feeling about for it with a distressed silk foot, when an inspiration flashed into her head, filling her eyes with brilliant laughter. The Administrator was not at the moment occupied any more than herself; he was leaning back in his chair, his eyes for once cast down, his massive face inwardly absorbed, but one nervous hand playing with the fruit knife betraying the active, working brain. Mrs. Lewin looked at him . . . were they all wrong? Had Mrs. Clayton and the water scheme failed to arrest his attention for exactly the same reason that her own tentative efforts had not succeeded—that they had all appealed to the wrong side of the man? How would audacity do instead? . . .

She leaned forward, her face flushed with her own uncertain daring, her eyes still full of laughter, half excited, half amused at the experiment, and spoke hurriedly under her breath.

"Mr. Gregory, will you try and find my shoe for me?"

The hand that played with the fruit knife stopped as if by clockwork, and the Administrator raised his hard eyes and looked full into hers in his amazement. A half-smile softened his own lips in answer to her apologetic dimples.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Lewin?"

"My shoe!" said Chum with apparent impatience. "I have a foolish habit of slipping them off at meals and I've lost one, and Mrs. White will look at me and rise in a minute, and I can't go. Do feel for it! It must be somewhere near you."

His face flushed dark red with suppressed laughter, as, more awake to the situation than she had ever known him, he sat back and felt cautiously about in the unseen space of floor. A minute later he had really found it, and caught it between his feet. The little soft satin thing felt utterly alien and feminine, and yielded to the pressure of his feet, yet just because it was so empty it suggested to his senses the foot that would fill it. He pushed it carefully towards Mrs. Lewin, his eyes still fixed upon her.

"Have you found it?" she said eagerly, without a trace of consciousness in her charming face. "Thank you so much! . . . Yes, I have it! . . . That's all right!"

He had inevitably touched the little unslippered foot in its silk stocking, but she did not seem to be aware of the fact as he was. Mrs. White had risen, and Mrs. Lewin rose too, with one brilliant smile of thanks at him—nothing more. The Administrator was nearest to the door; he got out of his seat and held it for the ladies, looking down on them from his unusual height as they passed,—Mrs. Arthur White in dull white silk, a comfortable, portly presence—Mrs. Clayton, still trying to attract attention with a jingle of bangles, but his eyes were blank;—Diana Churton, hard and metallic and burnt to the collar-line, beneath which her bare neck was startlingly fair;—then a tall woman with a well-groomed head, and a black velvet rose nestling against the rich whiteness of her skin. He

scanned her as keenly as though he saw her for the first time, and he felt sure she did not notice it as she went calmly by, so softly unconscious of him that she was as easily graceful as though no strong masculine eyes were searching her from the crown of her head to the little foot that had a new meaning to him.

Mr. Gregory held the door until the last silk skirts had swept into the further room. Then he went back to his seat and sat down, and the talk buzzed round him of sugar works and hemp crops, and mixtures of races in Key Island, while a few men talked promotion and the chances of the army. Between his feet, as he sat there discussing his favourite topics, he could still feel the strange yielding softness of a little satin slipper. . . .

As Mrs. Lewin entered the drawing-room the coffee came in from the servants' quarters. She sat down in the nearest chair, which happened to be beside a little table where a fancy mirror lay with some other trifles. The other women had crossed over to the coffee-tray; Chum took up the glass deliberately, and looked at herself; first on this side and then on that. The inspection was entirely satisfactory.

She laid down the mirror, and smiled as if distinctly amused. For it had occurred to her that they had all been fools and had wasted much valuable time, and when women are fools the men will not help them out of their folly.

"He is only a man!" she said a little contemptuously, going back to her first comment.

By the time the men came into the drawing-room, most of the women had drifted out on to the stoep, but the two Bridge tables were placed and waiting, and the Bridge players sat down to the

serious business of their evening, while Hamilton Gurney of the Wessex wheeled the piano out into the cool darkness and fortified by cého began to sing. He had that gift of the gods a real tenor voice, and when he sang he was suddenly transformed from an ordinary young man in a Line Regiment to a satellite of the Angel Israfil, with power over his fellow-creatures to wring their hearts and bring tears into their eyes. It is a little pitiful of human nature that intense pleasure always shows itself most simply in weeping; for when the senior sub. of the Wessex had dropped his last soft note into a listening silence most of his hearers had uncomfortable lumps in their throats, and believed that it was a foretaste of Heaven.

Mrs. Lewin had seated herself in a basket-chair as far from other listeners as she could, for she was selfish over music, and felt inclined to turn and rend any one who interrupted her enjoyment of it. It represented the only violent emotion that she had really experienced, and she objected to facing the public with quivering nerves. To-night she was to be more than usually harrowed because Mr. Gurney, in a fit of sentimentalism engendered by her own black rose, had chosen a song with her name interwoven—a song that Blumenthal loved best of all he wrote, and which seems as if the accompaniment were born of the air. It is called "Leoline," but Chum missed the reference to herself as completely as she lost sight of the pink-and-white young man at the piano who was casting glances at her shadowy corner. Hamilton Gurney did not realise that he was merely the vehicle of his own gift, and therefore he made the mistake of accepting the attention he knew he received not only as for his voice, but for his very unimportant self.

"One night we sat below the porch
And out in that warm air,
A firefly, like a dying star,
Fell tangled in her hair;
But I kissed him lightly off again
And he fluttered up the vine,
And died into the darkness
For the love of Leoline!"

Mrs. Lewin had drifted away into a sea of pain, as the rich notes played over her nerves. Had she thought about him she would have been positive that the Administrator was playing Bridge at Major Churton's table, but she was not thinking of him, nor did she realise until long after the song was over that he was standing near her, a tall dark shadow behind her chair, looking with very far-seeing eyes from Mr. Gurney's obvious application of his song to Mrs. Lewin's equal ignoring of it.

"We sang our songs together,
Till the stars shook in the skies;
We spoke—we spoke of common things—
But the tears were in our eyes!
And my hand I know it trembled
To each light warm touch of thine . . .
Yet we are friends, and only friends,
My lost love, Leoline!"

"That's her name, eh!" said Mr. Gregory, with some dry amusement. "And that young fool is trying to catch her attention to the fact. It's a pity that he can't realise his position of a Man behind a Voice."

Chum moved her head restlessly, conscious that her heart was beating thickly as only the slow rich notes ever made it beat. It frightened her to have even the suspicion of an emotion she could not control, and this was certainly a thing that seemed apart from her. Life had been most comfortably manageable so far.

"I wonder what her husband calls her?" mused the Administrator, his eyes absently fixed on the point of a little satin slipper, showing beneath the frills of her skirt. "Leoline—Lena—Leo—she is not a woman to lack a pet name, for all her inches!"

"Chum!" said Captain Lewin, strolling across the stoep with his hands in his pockets. "Come in and drink Mr. White's health—there's cého going!"

And a dozen voices seemed to echo his words from the lighted windows—"Chum, are you out there?" "Chum—excuse me, Mrs. Lewin, it's so catching!—but do come in." "Come along, Chum!"

"At all events," said the Administrator, with an ugly smile, "that name is not sacred to one person!"

CHAPTER VI

"La femme qui n'a que son mari est une femme déserte."—*French Proverb.*

BEHIND the Lewins' bungalow the rich hillside ran up yellow with cane, for their garden joined the boundaries of Mr. Denver's estate, and save for a fringe of logwood and guava the sugar spread all about his many acres. If Mrs. Lewin crossed the gravel paths among the rose trees, and pushed her way through a tangle of debatable ground, she found herself out among the waving blades that rose above her height and almost kissed over her head. She had an insistent love of the early morning, when the languid air was at least cooled with the dawn, and full of faint scent; and when her husband was still sleeping off the healthy effects of two hours' hard tennis, she would get up and go out, whereby she gained a very irradicable impression of the sugar industry in all its phases, from the flat-footed natives strolling up to work, to the grinding and heaving of the sugar factories, for she strayed as far as the actual buildings where it was carried on, and came back to breakfast with an English appetite, and a Key Island thirst. Ally called it restlessness.

On the morning after the Whites' dinner, the spirit woke her early. She rose and dressed, insisting on a bath at an hour which confirmed the Arabs' impression of British insanity, and went out

into the blue day. There were clouds over Maitso, but the gracious morning was very hushed and calm. Chum threaded the garden, and invaded the brushwood beyond, where the blue-gum and eucalyptus trees marked the boundary of her own territory, and the dew lay heavy on her white skirts. A meerkat jumped across her feet, as she pushed out into the fields of cane, and then the slope of the mountain rose before her, pure green with sugar, a delight to look upon. This land belonged to Mr. James Denver, the father of the young lady whose name was connected in every Key Island mouth with Hamilton Gurney's, and the ugly chimneys of his factory rose half-way up the hill, above the long, grey sugar works. The men had gone to their labour half-an-hour since, and Mrs. Lewin pushed her way boldly in between the ridges where the cane grew, and sauntered along, feeling that life was very good, and that Earth smelt like Heaven, as indeed it did if Heaven is a combination of hothouse and conservatory. In a land where every other tree flowers, and where gardenias riot in the hedges, it seems as if the essence of all the honey that was ever gathered was resolved back into its original elements within one's immediate surroundings.

Last night's success was really the satin lining to Mrs. Lewin's mood, for there is no factor so conducive to physical pleasure as a gentle mental stimulant. She had made the worn-out discovery that a man is best reached through his emotions, and that his reason is a secondary line of attack, and it amused her. But she was really not thinking of the object of her success so much as generalising over the frailty of his sex, when suddenly she saw him coming towards her.

A swell of ground, and a cross track through the

cane, had hidden the Administrator until they were only a few yards distant from each other. Without a suspicion of his nearness, any more than she had been when Gurney sang, Chum came through the dancing morning, while the great green cane bowed over her head and made a royal avenue for her as she passed, as of sunshine dripping through clear emeralds—so liquid yellow was the light through the blades. She had grown to love the cane, from the light emphatic patches of it in distance, to the near waving blades so suggestive of sweet taste in their very colour. There was a little Nigger song that Hamilton Gurney sang in a voice as luscious as the sugar; she hummed it as she passed—

"All the world am singing this refrain—
Sweeter than the sugar from the cane! . . .
You are the sweetest girl around,
Just the sweetest girl I know ——"

She broke off to throw up her head and catch another footstep for the first time, then sauntered on to meet it with the last line—

"And the sugar—sugar—sugar—from the cane!"

"Good-morning, Mr. Gregory!"

"Good-morning, Mrs. Lewin!"

They were conscious eyes this time, that looked down in their penetration at every feminine attraction presented to him. The secretary's wife stood the inspection with the unconscious serenity of last night.

"How very unofficial of you to be out like this! One dispenses with outriders and a flourish of trumpets in Key Island, but one does expect to think of the Administrator breakfasting in languid dignity while other people are already abroad!"

He made a wry face. "We are very unofficial here, thank Heaven! It is one of the few advantages of our diminutiveness. Where are you going, to Denver's?"

"No, I was trespassing on his ground, merely for a stroll."

"You have seen the factory?"

"Not yet, though I have ventured as far as the door."

"Come along," he said unceremoniously. "It is just up the hill—I'll take you round."

Mrs. Lewin smiled inwardly, and picking up her spotless skirts stepped into the next furrow. Here the cane had been cut, but a little further on the golden green blades drove them into the draining ditch until they struck the road which cut the field in two. There were rough tram-lines running along it, and a small engine was hauling the trucks up and down the hillside to the factory. Gregory stopped the man who was just starting the load, and there was a brief colloquy. Then he turned to the last truck, which, unlike its fellows, was not open to the sky and loaded with the cane, but resembled a waggon without ends, and had rough seats running down each side of it. This was the riding truck, and throwing a piece of matting over a seat he put his hand under Mrs. Lewin's arm and lifted rather than helped her in, for the step was steep. In the midst of her amused excitement she was conscious of his unceremonious strength, and with the instinctive feminine compliment to it her own weakness and helplessness seemed suddenly to have increased.

"We shall have time to go round before that breakfast you insist on my eating in my official capacity," he said, and his lips smiled, while his lidless eyes never narrowed from their intense stare at

her. It began to give her a sense of weariness, a feeling that he had never ceased looking at her since the night before, when he was first conscious of her presence. Perhaps he had been doing it in his own mind all the night.

The movement of the trucks was surprisingly smooth, but they were all worked on springs. They swept up through the furrowed fields, and came to a clinking standstill before the gaping mouth of the factory. It seemed to Mrs. Lewin a zinc building with a whirr of machinery inside too large for its frail shell, and the impression increased, rather than otherwise, when she entered. All the world was suddenly transformed to sugar—the rich smell of it was in the air, the dark stream of it falling from the pipes to the big teaches and the cooler, the very floor sticky with it, so that she stepped aside from the pools of hot liquid. After the increasing glare outside the dark of the place was grateful, and through the dark were visible bronzed forms, stripped and dripping with sweat, guiding the machinery, shovelling down the waste for fuel, and chopping at the congealed masses of the later stages of the sugar with some pronged instrument. There was labour on every hand, and the restless tide of human life seemed gathered into an ordered groove of industry.

Gregory led his companion up steep ladders and over wet stones without consideration for her fresh skirts, explaining the process as they went on. It was wonderful how his forceful whispers carried through the whirr of the flying wheels, and he took it off-handedly for granted that Mrs. Lewin would miss no detail on account of her clothes. He knew the work as well as its owner, and dipped the testing-tube into the refining sugar to show her how the lime had purified the dirty liqueur to a pure gold

like honey. Further on, at the end of the building, were the great vats where rum was fermenting, and an odour like rich wine rose in Chum's nostrils as he lifted the lid and showed her the frothy, muddy contents.

"Dip in your finger—it's warm," he said, stirring it with his own. Mrs. Lewin, balancing on a precarious plank, with her dainty skirts held high, was conscious of an inward shudder as her long white hand touched the strong-smelling stuff, and yet it never occurred to her to disobey, or so much as enter a protest.

"Is this what the natives *drink?*" she said, in mild surprise.

"Yes—by and by, when it's cleared. Filthy stuff!" he said shortly. "It's better than hemp, though. Can you get down? Better let me lift you——"

But she laid her cool hands in his and jumped, landing safely at his side, and again conscious of his physical as well as mental power. Then the sight-seeing was over, and he led the way out by another door and round to the waiting trucks to ride back. Here Gregory paused a minute, and looked over the waving crops and the flourishing scene of labour with an expression that Mrs. Lewin did not at the moment understand. When he had come to Key Island the sugar-planters were sullen and depressed; they wanted encouragement from the Home Government, and they regarded the change of administration in Key Island as no benefit to themselves. The old *régime* had been a bad one, and had ended in disaster; but they knew at least what they had to expect, and the first "spring cleaning" of the Imperial Government had alarmed them with grave prognostications for the future of the island. Gregory had already made them change

their opinions during the short time he had been in possession. He had thrown himself heart and soul into the industries of the island, and so assured the planters that Port Victoria would not be merely a coaling-station. Because he was in earnest he gained their confidence, and worked with them to make the land prosperous again. The humming factories were a proof of his success; he saw his schemes fulfilling themselves actually before him, and his hard eyes brightened with the strange look over which Mrs. Lewin pondered all the way home. It was, in a degree, the same look that makes a young mother most ineffably, justifiably proud—the look that is but a reflex of God's when, His work spread before Him, He saw that it was very good. For there is no joy like the joy of creation.

"What is he thinking about?" said Leoline Lewin to herself, with awakened interest, her eyes on the Administrator's reserved face.

"Denver employs six hundred on his estate alone," was all Gregory remarked aloud. "I wish all the planters took as many."

"Why?"

"If there were no idlers, there would be less likelihood of a rising. When the Key'landers begin to sit in the gutter and jaw through the Miroro (sleep hour) in a snarly sing-song, then look out. It began that way last time."

"Ah!—Mr. Gregory, what would happen if you burnt the hemp crops?"

"I don't know." But he looked at her in some surprise for the audacity of her question. It had been tacitly understood that such an extreme measure might be attempted by this Administrator only; but no one had even broached such a subject to himself. Gregory thought of the unlikelihood of his secretary even speculating on such an idea, and

smiled even more broadly. Decidedly this girl ought to have been the boy!

"It might bring matters to a head, and I don't know that I should be sorry," he admitted after a moment. "There is a lot of underhand discontent, and the population is like a silly child who overestimates its own importance and power to be naughty. A sharp lesson might clear the air—see?"

It is wonderful how indiscreet men will be to a pretty woman. Mrs. Lewin knew how to listen; also as Evelyn Gregory talked he could see himself reflected in the big pupils of her eyes, and his mental attitude reflected in the equally receptive calibre of her mind. He was not very used to sympathy in his schemes, because he rarely confided them to any one, and he fancied Mrs. Lewin the more exceptional on this account, whereas she was merely more adroit in drawing him on. She was, besides, really interested, and he saw that, and saw also that she was a woman, which touched his senses, and ended by driving the more serious side of the conversation out of his head. For Chum, with a flash of genius, dropped the political standpoint at her own gate, and held out her hand with a merely social attractiveness.

"My husband will be ravenous, and I shall get scolded," she said, with a smile in the changing colours of her eyes. "But I was very interested—it was your fault!"

The curve of her lips was not a pout, but Mr. Gregory suddenly saw himself as a successful rival to Captain Lewin as regarded his wife's time—the masculine cause of a scolding too, for a more subtle suggestion than a late breakfast lay in the words. He smiled a little also, and the blood beat with a small pleased triumph in the hand that held hers.

"He must like me, if he is to like Ally!" said Chum to herself in vague excuse, as she went into her room to change her soiled skirt and shoes. "And that is the only way to attract him, as yet. . . . What a harsh, ugly face he has!—Been waiting long, Ally?"

Fresh from her encounter with the Administrator, her husband's good looks struck her with a sudden pride in possession. She paused behind his chair, and laying her hands on his shoulders bent down to kiss him and talk tender nonsense.

"Dear thing! how nice it looks in its beautiful white clothes!" she said softly, her arm round the broad shoulders under the cool linen coat.

"Where have you been, old girl?" Ally returned, pushing his chair back from the table to return the caress heartily. "I've been dressed half-an-hour."

"Up to Denver's Works, and all round them with —who do you think? Three guesses!"

"Halton!"

"Wrong!—Silly boy! as if I didn't love my beautiful husband better than hundreds of Mr. Haltons!"

"I know you do!—I should think it very bad taste if you didn't," said Ally, calmly. "Brissy, then?"

"No,—why, he is orderly officer this week!"

"Which is all that lies between me and the Divorce Court evidently! Well, I don't think you have another mash, Chum—unless it's Churton?"

"All wrong. I fly at higher game. Now then!"

"Not ——"

"The Administrator!"

Ally whistled. "You don't say so!" he said. "How the deuce did it happen?"

"He met me trespassing on the estate and asked me to go. Now I think of it, he never said why *he* was there, but he seemed like a second owner."

"Oh, he is well in with all the Planters. Well?"

"He asked me to go, as I say, and I went. Listen, Ally"—and she left him and walked round to her end of the table—"he became almost confiding about the natives. I shall know his schemes yet, and then I can tell you, and knowledge is power! He will think you have divined his mind."

"Catch me divining his mind! It would be like groping in a fusty roomful of blue-books! Oh, by the way, Chum, Gurney wants to sell that grey pony of his—I think we might as well have another."

"No, but do listen, Ally! At present the native question is so hopeless because of the mixed races and opposing interests, but if a good breed predominated—the Hovas, for instance—and we could get them to come over and leaven the lump ——"

A big hard-backed beetle had floundered on to the table right in front of Alaric's plate, and instinctively he had set his glass of iced water on it. The glass being nearly empty the beetle was walking away with it, and with Alaric's attention at the same time. Chum stopped abruptly.

"You don't care!" she said, with a sudden blank feeling upon her. "You are much more interested in playing schoolboy tricks!"

"I beg your pardon, really! But I'm so sick of Gregory's importation and emigration schemes." Ally's eyes were affectionate and apologetic too. He looked like a big dog accustomed to petting, and very unaccustomed to being chidden. "I say, Chum, do look at this fellow though! The other

night at mess we got a lot,—every one of us had a beetle, and laid odds as to whose would fly off first. You know if you turn them on their backs, ten to one they can't get up, and if you even touch them ——"

But now it was Chum's attention which had wandered, nor was she very concerned with the intellectual pursuits of the Wessex mess. She felt that the racing of hard-backed beetles was the limit of their capacity: and then reproached herself for self-conscious superiority. The question of Key Island and its possible improvements dropped to pieces, nor was it revived successfully on other occasions. But Captain Alaric Lewin escaped from work early that day, and rode out to Maitso with his wife, where from four o'clock to six they played at Go-one-better, which is a very instructive game needing nothing but five handkerchiefs and a Panama hat, and affords some amusement if you cannot play tennis. The grass was wet, but they laughed themselves thirsty over Go-one-better, and then sat on the stoep of the mess and drank cého, and when the Administrator's A.D.C. and Mrs. Lewin left, Ally was conscious of no flaw in his domestic bliss. Key Island was a beastly hole, and he must really look up all the influence he could to get a decent Station—for Chum's sake, of course—but in the meantime one could have a very pleasant time if there were people like the Churtons and old Bristles round. To-morrow they would play Polo of sorts—Gurney must learn not to cross, though !—and Wednesday was gymkana. If only he had been more of an A.D.C. and less of a secretary, even work would not have been so irksome. But the Administrator chafed at entertainments, and when he was forced into some formality at Government House he usually managed to be summoned away, and left

Halton to represent him and Mrs. White to entertain. It was a saying in Key Island that he paid the Town Wardens of Port Albert and China Town an extra stipend to telephone for him on such occasions, and only when a Government House dinner was unavoidable did Mr. Gregory appear as a host. Since Ally had been out there had been no entertainment at Government House, and his social gifts were wasted. It would have been dull enough, no doubt, but still something to do, he thought, and better than all clerical work, and he yawned over the morrow's monotony as he laid his handsome, empty head on the pillow that night.

What Mrs. Lewin thought of the last twenty-four hours' experiences she no longer tried to make him understand.

CHAPTER VII

"In vino veritas."—*Latin Proverb.*

THE way of the Army woman is hard. She starts as a nice girl, with a weakness for red cloth and jingles; but then she marries, and discovers, amongst other shocks, what lies beneath the red cloth. Her husband may still be her ideal hero to her, or he may be merely the figure-head of a position in which she gets plenty of attention and some amusement; but his profession will inevitably take her into desert places of the earth where she samples discomfort until the iron enters into her domestic soul. If it be in India she will do pretty well, until he gets a bad Station, though even the horrors of loneliness and fever may be mitigated by obtainable service. But by the time she is suddenly transferred with him to another Colony there will be a nursery in progress, and then the tragedy—the ugly, sordid tragedy of a married life stripped of its decencies and privacies—will very possibly begin. She will leave her comfortable staff behind her, because of the Emigration Act, and on the troop-ship she will begin to taste the joys of being her own nurses and maid. Then her temper wears, and she has not quite so much time to spend over her appearance, but instinct holding good she adopts the harder and more masculine style as being easier to compass under all trials of circumstance. Foreign

L. & C.

Stations batter the daintiness of life out of her, the narrow limits of the Army world distort her mental vision, the drawbacks she struggles to overcome leave their mark on her. Finally there comes the day when even the hateful little compensations to which she has become used have to be given up—the snobbish sense of position, and the dangling after her of men other than her husband, who find in her a *passée* fashion,—for the soldier's service is over, and then comes Ealing and a dress allowance to be saved up for the sales.

Diana Churton had reached the ominous point in her career when she saw half-pay darkening the horizon. It was unlikely that Major Churton would ever be given the regiment, and, as he said, twenty years of foreign service had made the solid dullness of England a home to his weary eyes. Diana had no children to plot and plan for, and marry into the same life that she had found a dubious success; their one little girl had died at Agra, and the dumb tragedy of their lives was in the moment when they turned away from the little grave, in a city for ever sacred to the dead by that grand white memory called the Taj, and went their separate ways. The child as she grew older might have drawn them closer together again; her grave somehow thrust them apart.

"If he thinks I neglected her, or that it was my fault, I could kill him!" thought the woman fiercely, jealous of her motherhood.

"If she hints that I do care, I shall lose my control—better let the very subject alone," thought the man, for he was afraid of his own temper.

So Di Churton dropped the remnants of her girlhood into the void of her husband's silence, and life went on as before—always the indefinite man who rode with her and danced with her, always the hard

tongues of the Station and the keeping just on the safe side, always the restless, feverish desire to get something out of life and the sense of disillusion. She never lost her husband's confidence, for she was a wise woman; but she learned a mutual accommodation when "Bute was thick with Mrs. So-and-so." Diana was attracted by men rather than her own sex; she was in few senses a nice woman, and unless she had an object in cultivating them, the other ladies in the garrison found her frankly rude.

At Port Victoria she was fairly intimate with Mrs. Gilderoy until the arrival of the Lewins, whereupon she transferred her preference to Leoline, not only on account of Alaric, but because Chum was obviously successful socially, and Bute was conveniently attracted. It would have suited Mrs. Churton very well to have the Lewins nearer, for the distance up to Maitso from their bungalow was a frequent reason for Mrs. Lewin to slip out of an invitation there. It happened one morning, for instance, that on a day when Diana had planned to have her company Chum rode into town late, and gave herself a headache with the heat and the exhaustion of the air. The smell of Port Victoria is peculiarly its own, and seems to be compounded of all the mixed races that inhabit it, not excepting the white, for the hot khaki certainly lends its own peculiar flavour. The humid streets do not smell of the packed stores, or of the decaying vegetation, or even of the need for drainage, though they might do so, and it is a surprise to those who know the place that they do not; but the juices of warm Chinaman and Negro and Arab and Malagasy, seem to merge and produce an effect that is numbing to the uninitiated. After six months or so in the town people declare that they hardly notice it, but Mrs. Lewin had not reached that stage. She

turned Liscarton's head towards the hillside, and felt thankful that if her homeward way was to be overscented it would be with too much sweetness rather than otherwise. For it was a characteristic of Port Victoria that its rank nastiness should be succeeded by enervating odours of flowers the minute one gets out of the streets and into the blossoming tangle of hills round about.

The town seemed unusually glaring, and clattered with khaki. The rattling by of an officer's pony, and the salute flashed into her dazzled eyes, made Chum's head swim, until she was faintly conscious of something else that distracted her attention from herself. It was the hour of the Miroro—the noonday sleep—and the coloured people had lounged out of store and wharf and were sitting in the gutters and on the steps of the houses, eating fessikh and dozing and playing native games. But above it and through it all rang a sing-song snarl of patois, like the complaining note of a caged beast. Liscarton almost stopped for the instinctive pressure on his rein, and Mrs. Lewin turned in her saddle to look back at the streets she was leaving. She remembered Gregory's warning as to the signs of trouble; this sounded like it, this strange note of dissatisfaction in the general hum.

"I will speak to Ally, and ask him if there is anything fresh—any measure of the Government that is unpopular," she thought, beginning to canter uphill mechanically. A Key Island pony will always canter his hills, unless really tired, upon the principle that it is better to get over a difficulty quickly and breath yourself afterwards. He is bound to be hot with the climb, and the impetus of a quicker motion carries him over the rough ground with greater ease.

As Chum entered the delicious coolness of their

own bungalow, the telephone rang, and she went to answer it. Her husband's voice spoke to her, faintly muffled.

"Who's there? . . . Oh, is it you, Chum? I'm at the club, and it's too late to come out. Brissy's lunching with me."

"Don't drink too many céhos!" said Chum resignedly from her end of the communication tube. "And tell Captain Nugent I expect him to dinner to-morrow—he can bring the banjo."

"All right. Well, look here, Chum, I'm dining with the Churtons unfortunately—they want to know if you can ride out too?"

"My head is too bad. I'm only just out from town, and the heat made it ache a good deal. I'm afraid I should be the skeleton at the feast if I attempted to get up to Maitso. It's nothing—don't be a silly boy! I shall have to make the effort and come to the Churtons if you bother."

"No don't, if you feel seedy. I'll ride out and see how you are after lunch."

"You are not to do anything of the kind—it's too hot for you. Stay at the club. Oh, Ally——"

"Well?"

"Is there anything going on in the Legislature?"

"Not that I know of more than the usual—ahem!—grind. What's up?"

"Nothing. I only thought—oh, nothing. Give my love to Di."

"All right. Take care of yourself, dear." Ally rang off hastily, and turned to drink cého with relief. He was not a hypocrite, and he had reached a point when he did not want Chum to send her love to Mrs. Churton.

After all, he did not ride out to their bungalow, for he talked horse with Captain Nugent to the accompaniment of many whiskies, and then it

seemed too late, remembering that he had to dress —he had had his clothes sent down to the club— and get his pony and ride up to Maitso. But Brissy was not pressed for time, and offered himself as a substitute, whereby it came to pass that he turned up to have tea with Chum, and impressed her anew in her secret heart with his absolute inferiority to Ally, and the wearying vacuum of his brains.

"He is like a bad copy of Ally, too," she thought critically, looking at the burnt face and the young eyes drawn round with spurious wrinkles by foreign service. Under the black moustache Brissy's teeth flashed as he talked, for he had a trick of drawing back his upper lip, and above his low forehead the dark hair thatched an unusually flat head. Owing to vivid colouring, he was considered a handsome man among his fellows; but Mrs. Lewin did not admire him.

"His eyes have no soul in them—he is just a healthy animal!" she said to herself disparagingly, as he stolidly drank his fourth cup of tea and showed no signs of going. "Oh, thank Heaven, Ally is not like this! What shall I talk about?"

It seemed ridiculous to think of Brissy as a father, and Mrs. Lewin never drew him on to domestic subjects as she might other married men, partly because it struck her as inappropriate to him, and partly because there was a general belief in Key Island that he would have liked to bring his wife out with him, but that Mrs. Nugent had not been attracted by a small and dull Station such as Port Victoria, and had preferred to wait until he had something better. Brissy staunchly asserted that her health would not stand the heat, but Captain Gilderoy had shrugged his shoulders to a select audience, and given it as his opinion that at the last

moment Mrs. Nugent had jibbed! The theory met with credence, and therefore Chum talked banjos and ponies rather than married interests, and had no suspicion that Brissy's unemotional eyes strayed round the home, for which he envied "old Ally Sloper," with a secret wistfulness. He was adding her presence at her husband's side to the long list of advantages with which he had already endowed her, while she privately decided that a lifelong *tête-à-tête* with Bristow Nugent would exhaust the vitality of any woman, and that Mrs. Nugent's absence needed no explanation to a sympathetic mind.

Her thoughts touched Ally with fonder appreciation in contrast. He was at the moment just riding leisurely up the winding road that led to Maitso, —a handsome fellow, and well contented with himself, and his wife with him. On his right rose the solid buildings of the Mess, and as the path swung over the hill, corkscrew-wise, the dotted barracks grouped themselves on either hand. It was like a town in itself, intersected with the irrepressible vegetation which broke out into guava and logwood brush even here. Maitso looked "greener" and more deserving of its name than it really was from the town; but as Captain Lewin rode up to the Churtons' quarters, he passed through the slight screen of logwood, and was shielded from the setting sun.

"Come in, Ally. Bute's somewhere at the Mess," said Mrs. Churton, appearing on the stoep. "Where's Chum?"

"She had a headache—said she was awfully sorry she didn't feel up to coming. I'm glad she didn't try, it was so hot riding up."

"I'm sorry she couldn't, though, as we shall be odd numbers. Poor old fellow! you are hot!

Will you have a cého or whiskey?" Diana was hospitable.

Ally chose cého, but the whiskey followed, and when the Major appeared they had more, sitting out until dinner-time and talking in a desultory fashion, while they watched the sky darken behind the solemn fans of the ravenalas. How hot it was! Even up at Maitso the freshness seemed to have been melted from the sea breeze before it reached them, and the heavy air clung like a miasma. It was intoxicatingly sweet, but languid and enervating until the beads of sweat stood on the men's temples without more exertion than their own vitality, and even Diana Churton gasped.

"By Jove! it's been a swilling day!" Major Churton remarked, as he stretched his hand for the whiskey. "My throat feels like blotting-paper. Have some more, Lewin?"

"Thanks!"

There were no ladies present at dinner besides Di, but two men from Mitsinjovy dropped in, and presently they played Poker. Ally was one of the winners, but more by luck than judgment, for the heat—or something else—seemed to be making his head heavy. Twice he thought he got up to go, and then some one said the night was yet young, and his limbs felt comfortably indisposed to bestir themselves. When midnight struck he dragged himself to his feet with a feeling of bewilderment.

"Great Scot! Chum will think I'm killed—had a headache, too, poor little soul!" he said vaguely. His splendid, vacant face was turned to the hot night beyond the open doors; he was wondering how he should ever get down that winding hill in the dark with this stupid feeling in his brain. He must trust to the pony, it was no good worrying.

Diana beckoned him imperiously on to the stoep,

and he obeyed, pulling himself together and walking straight, without control of his own body, it seemed, into the cooler night air. She was holding one of the big Mess tumblers, with the Wessex crest on it, sparkling with whiskey and soda, and deliciously cold with ice.

"A stirrup cup!" she said hurriedly. "Come, you must drink it! You are sleepy with the heat of the rooms. This will brace you up to get home."

"Upon my word, Di, I've had enough."

But she laughed and lifted it to his lips for him, and his hand closed on hers and the glass together. Ally was smoking, but he took the cigar from his lips as if he wondered what to do with it, and Mrs. Churton held it for him while he drank, sniffing it appreciatively. To some women the smell of smoke is a kind of lurid dissipation. The taste of tobacco in their own mouths is not nearly so suggestive to them. Ally finished the whiskey, and then something happened. He did not seem able to hold the glass, and it fell and smashed at his feet. He was troubled, because it belonged to the Mess, and those glasses were expensive things, and had to be made in England; but Mrs. Churton coolly kicked the fragments out of the way, and said it did not matter. At least the whiskey had not been wasted!

How dark it was on the stoep, and how hot and still! Up in the further corner no one could see them from the lighted room. He remembered nothing of getting there, only that her face looked softer than usual in the little light there was; and when she put her cool hands behind his head and kissed him, he felt a sly amusement that she should be so much more keen than he; there was a passion in her kisses, while there was none, he thought, in his. And her voice rang in his ears, "Ally! Ally!

come to me when other women fail you!" while he wondered that it seemed to mean nothing. He was far more conscious of the outspread fans of the ravenalas, as if they would fain screen him from the night.

Some one brought his pony round then, and he mounted, surprised it was so easy, and turned the brute's head down the slope. Their voices echoed after him and died away on the stillness of the air, bidding him good-night, chaffing him noisily, confusing the way he was going. It was impossible to judge one building from another now, and the damned paths wound round and round like a maze. He should take a wrong turning—no, this was safer! He drove his spurs into his pony's flanks and tore down the hill at a gallop, holding the animal mechanically from stumbling, but trusting to his instinct to get down safely. Why they did not pitch down the steep slopes he did not know, but he was not in the least afraid; a mad exhilaration took hold of him through the wild ride, and he urged the pony on still when he got to the foot of the hill, and clattered through the sleeping town, but the pony knew his way home. Stumbling and dripping with sweat, man and horse galloped the last few yards, and swept up to the very stable door, where the pony stopped with falling head and streaming flanks.

Ally slipped out of the saddle, feeling his mount vaguely, and trying to find the words to explain that he was to be rubbed down and handled carefully, but they would not come, and he gave the rein in silence to a sleepy sais, who seemed to have risen out of the shadows of the stoep. A minute later his voice came back in a curse, for he tripped over the bodies of his own servants crouched close to the cool stones. There were more than the men

of his household there, but he did not know. He fumbled at the door, got it unlatched, and reeling over to his dressing-room, dropped like a stone on to the floor in the middle of the room.

The heat of the night had prevented Chum from sleeping at first, and though her headache had driven her to bed early, she had lain there for an hour looking up at the white fall of the mosquito curtain, and listening to the stupid bustle of a hard-back who had drifted in from the outside world in company with a dozen moths, and was floundering to find his way out again. She fell asleep at last listening for Ally's pony to come up the hill, and was in a deep slumber when the bang of a door shook her awake as completely as if she had never closed her eyes. She sat up in bed, wondering what had happened, and listening to some one who seemed to be strange to the house, and was trying to find his way about. A man must have got in, and she was all alone; yet the boldness of the intruder's movements as regarded noise, and his lack of caution, were very unlike the stealthiness of the coloured thief. At last the steps found Ally's dressing-room, and passed in. There was an instant's pause, a heavy fall, and silence.

Mrs. Lewin was standing at the closed door between the two rooms almost before the sound had ceased; she had no knowledge of how she came there, or of how her fingers let down the rattling shutter with some vague idea of seeing through the opened slits. But there was darkness in the dressing-room, and she opened the door with one hand and switched on the electric light with the other, even as she passed in. Nothing had been touched from the time when she last saw Ally's man putting it in order that morning. His master having dressed at the club, the place had had an air of

lonely neatness all day, for Ally was regally careless how he flung his clothes about when present. Mrs. Lewin took a step forward and almost trod upon his prostrate body before she saw that the heavy dark something in the middle of the floor was a man.

He was lying nearly on his back, having turned in his fall with an instinctive effort towards the air. She dropped on her knees beside him, her heart beating heavily with the remembrance that the nearest doctor was half-an-hour's ride away, and trying to think what one did for a fit. He was breathing heavily, and his face was flushed and heated. She bent down to wrench open the soaked collar . . . and drew back with a choking breath.

Leoline Lewin had seen drunken men before—labourers, lying on alehouse benches, or in the sun; ragged wretches soaked in gin to drown their misery, and slinking past the police. She had heard stories, too, of her own male acquaintance being overcome upon occasion, and had found them funny enough to laugh at as told by their friends. But the real experience had never touched her before, nor had she seen the man who had always stood upright, to her imagination at least, suddenly cast from his dignity to grovel on the earth from which he came.

In the revulsion of the shock she stood very upright herself, as if to prove her own power—a grave, white figure overlooking the relaxed body in its tumbled dress-clothes which lay at her bare feet. Through the appalling silence sounded the man's heavy snoring breath, and the thrum of the hard-back which had followed her into the dressing-room, and was hitting itself against the beams of the ceiling.

Suddenly the woman remembered where and who she was, and what had happened. The little harassing details of the tragedy came back to her and woke her to shuddering action. She had been standing there for some minutes, and half-a-dozen dangers might have occurred to clench the position. The servants might hear and come to ask what was wrong, or some one might have followed Ally to see him safely home, though a quick glance at the probabilities reassured her that this—this prostrate helpless body, was a last stage that had not betrayed itself before. She sprang at the door and closed it swiftly, slipping the bolt; then she dragged the mattress off the couch and pushed it as near that helpless thing, that seemed no longer her husband, as was possible; and then, with her strong, young arms, she took it under the shoulders and dragged it on to the improvised bed, spreading a covering sheet over the betraying clothes. The exertion brought beads of moisture on to her fair soft body, and she stood up again panting a little, and trying to realise it all.

She must begin and love all over again, if she were to love so low at all. This degraded Ally, helpless on her mercy, was no longer the stalwart husband round whom she had built up her theoretical married life. A dozen little things that had been but pinpricks of annoyance started up in her mind suddenly, to intensify the final blow, and she saw him as a weak man, without the strenuous love of fighting and winning which she had tried to coax into him, self-contented, the mere tool of her own ambition whenever he had been forced into action. The bitterness of her thwarted instincts was uppermost as she turned away. That was the mate of her own ripe womanhood, the force round which her eager life was to centre—that poor weak

nature which would resist one temptation as little as another, for in the cruelty of this revelation she acknowledged what she had been so pitifully denying to herself,—that Alaric Lewin was no master of life, but the sport of his own idle inclinations.

She was moving back to her own room with dragging feet, when a new terror seemed to spring up and startle her back into action again. Some one was coming up the garden path with a heavy tramp that came straight on towards the stoep and the house. It was no barefooted Arab, but the impatient tread of a white man who was his own messenger, and with a horrible premonition she knew it from any more probable one that it might have been. It was the Administrator, and he had some purpose in thus coming to his Secretary at one o'clock in the morning. The sing-song snarl outside the stores and in the gutters, during the Miroro, came back to her mind ominously.

With some idea of stopping him before he could rouse the servants to get into the house, she hastily left the dressing-room, and closing the door behind her, as if it held an ugly secret, she sped across the large bare dining-room and slipped back the bolt of the rough wooden door. But she need not have troubled herself for the household. Evelyn Gregory had almost brushed against the sleeping Arabs in his rapid transit from the garden gate to the house, but as he passed along the stoep he coolly stepped over the slumbering tangle at his feet with the briefest passing scorn for men and women. It meant nothing to him in his absorption, and indeed he hardly knew that the humanity he spurned with his foot was there. He did not expect any of the servants to answer his knock, but he meant to rouse Captain Lewin, and with this grim intent he swung his heavy riding whip round and brought the

weighted end rattling down on the slight panels of the door. The whip was his constant companion, and served not for his ponies, but as a weapon of defence or of punishment in an emergency. Its weight was consequently no slight one, but before he could shake the door again it was quietly opened, leaving him with the upraised whip in his hand, the long lash coiled round his wrist, and his whole attitude unintentionally threatening.

In the doorway stood a marvellous fair woman in her nightdress, the open neck showing her so warm and white, that with a little instant thrill he guessed at the delicious shoulder under the lace. She had come so swiftly that she had not even drawn the white silk wrapper closely round her, and one little slipper had fallen from her; he saw it lying in the waste of floor behind her, where it had slipped from her running foot, and he thought of another white satin morsel that he had held between his own. The coil of her hair was tossed sideways over her shoulder, and brushed away from her forehead, leaving her unusually girlish without its customary mature dressing, but in her large eyes he saw that there was not the least thought of him. She was as unconscious of her sweet bare foot as of his cognizance of it, nor did she know that her careless whiteness was a seduction in itself. All her conscious life centred round the terror of the last few minutes, so that she saw only the situation she had to face.

"Come in, Mr. Gregory," she said under her breath, drawing aside for him to pass in. "What is it? *What* is it? Something is wrong!"

She had turned on the light as she came, and it shone in their two faces, the man still struggling with his personal thought, the woman strained by her private dread of discovery. But the light mechanically influenced her, so that she put up a slight

hand and tugged at the silk wrapper vaguely to veil her laces and frills. He watched her as if fascinated, without will-power to turn away, and when he spoke it was in short clipped phrases, as though it were an effort.

"There is a threatening of a rising. The police are out. I want the troops ready. Will you call your husband?"

There was a blank of silence, while it beat into her brain that somebody was required to ride to Maitso and take the alarm. She thought of a dull figure lying heavily on the floor, breathing stentoriously. . . .

"Captain Lewin was very late in coming home. He is sleeping heavily. I am afraid it will take some time to rouse him," she heard her own voice saying, in sentences as concise as his. "Would it not be better to send one of the men? I can call them in a moment."

She turned towards the door, but his outstretched hand guided her back without his having moved a step.

"I'll rouse him!" he said grimly. "Which is his room?"

There was a touch of resentment in him, which he himself did not know was there, that this heavy sleeper owned the woman before him. A man should sleep lightly with her near by, nor ever lose his happy consciousness of her even in sleep. There was something gross in the suggestion of her husband's heavy slumber.

"Where is Captain Lewin?" he said curtly.

Again she saw in her brain the quiet, orderly room, the degraded figure, the drunken lethargy that no imperious summons would break. Here was Ally's chance, and he had tossed it away for a momentary self-indulgence. She felt in her bitter

impotence that his whole life might be squandered after such a fashion, for where was her confidence now?

And the Administrator was waiting.

"He is very tired," she repeated dully, looking up at Gregory's sinister height with eyes which had grown piteous. It seemed to her as if the foundations of the man were made of granite, and she were hurling herself against them vainly.

Something in her face seemed to strike him, however, for he bent a little nearer to her, and looked almost curiously in her face.

"Is he ill?" he said; and the suppressed tones of his voice were a mere vibration.

She paused, with a lightning review of such a lie and its efficacy.

"Yes," she said in a low voice, her shamed eyes dropping from his. "I think—it is—a touch of fever." Then in a tone which did not realise its own despair, "I *cannot* rouse him!"

He stepped back with a long breath, and turned his face from her for a minute, as if listening to something afar off. She heard his chest rise and fall with an extra sense that was not hearing, and realised that he understood. All the sting and shame that had gone before seemed to be nothing in comparison to that moment. He knew, and he was a hard man who gave no second chances. Alaric Lewin was a failure to his judgment; not because he had got drunk on a hot night, which was nothing, but because he was useless in an emergency. The cause was little to a mind like Gregory's, but the weakness that might fail him again was unforgivable. He had the reputation of sweeping such men from his path as useless, without enmity, but without pity. The hopelessness of it all!

Suddenly she heard him speaking, and the whispering voice had a new kindness; he spoke gently, as if to some small frail thing that must not be hurt.

"Never mind—don't try and wake him. I'll go myself. Don't worry. Go to bed and rest. It will be all right."

He laid a large hand on her shoulder, as if to impress the words; she hardly noticed the action, but felt a dull surprise when he as quickly drew it back. The man was nothing to her, but a sudden glow of comfort sprang up in her heart at his last sentence. If he said it would be all right, he meant his own coadjutancy to make it so. She felt the power of his will, but not of his manhood, and her face was broken into softness as she turned it to him in farewell, and opened the door for his hasty departure.

"Good-night," he repeated. "Don't worry; go to bed yourself, and be quite easy. I am so sorry to have roused you." There was a touch of mastery in his voice, as if he had taken possession of the situation to heal her physical and mental weariness. She rested on it unconsciously, with the woman's craving for the strong man who shall not fail her. And Ally, alas, had failed!

As Gregory swung back along the stoep he looked down, consciously this time, at the sleeping Arabs, and there was interest and a secret sympathy in his heart. For the touch of the Eternal Feminine was on him, and he remembered that to love a woman was a goodly thing. His footsteps died away into the darkness of the garden, to the gate where he had tied his pony, and then after a pause came the sound of galloping hoofs as he rode off on his own errand. Mrs. Lewin heard it as she stood at the open shutters of her own window, for she had mechanically gone back to her room, and leaned there conscious

of nothing but a horrible reaction from the tensity of the past few minutes. With a primeval instinct she turned from the shelter which civilisation has raised over men's heads to the healing of the outside world, for she had a restless craving to get away from the confinement of the house and the ugly thing of which she knew in the next room.

The night was quick with fireflies, and the air was soft and warm to touch. Some winged thing sailed lazily by and made her start by the whirr of its heavy body close to her hair—a giant moth it seemed, with a barrel-like body and wings like a dragon-fly's. Down below on the stoep the Arabs lay asleep. . . . She pressed her hands over her wakeful eyes and tried not to sob, schooling herself because she was a woman—not a child who cries away the bitterness over a broken toy. This was more serious than a toy, and yet it seemed just like an old unreasonable nursery grief, that fretted for a thing it had endowed with spurious life.

She must begin and love all over again. There was no stronger nature above her to look up to and lean on in fancy, even though she guided by her brighter wits and keener vitality. She had cheated herself happily in thinking that Ally was really the moving spirit in their married life, and that he had a reserve of strength upon which she could lean in an emergency. He was nothing but a weak man, who must be shielded before the world, and watched and helped with tenderest care, but never more looked up to at quite the same height. No one should know or guess that he had so fallen; she would not even have to make excuses for him, she would manage so cleverly, for that was her new phase of wifehood. Even as the thought crossed her mind she turned her head nervously and listened, fancying that the servants were awake and coming

to ask who her late visitor had been. If she could only keep it from them till the morning, things would look more natural. Captain Lewin had slept in the dressing-room not to awaken her—he had thrown the mattress on the floor and lay there in hope of greater coolness. There was more draught on the floor—at least she could make it appear so. She went over the details in feverish haste, shielding and managing already with a woman's tragic skill. But that it should have to be so!

Back on her mind flashed the damning certainty that the one man who should have been ignorant had found out. She had felt his knowledge through the horrible pause after her stammering excuse, through his courteous sparing of her, and quick substitution of himself as a messenger, through the kindly fall of his hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry; go to bed yourself, and be quite easy. I will make it all right. I am so sorry to have roused you."

She had his promise then to make it all right. Yes, he could gloss it over too,—he would take the onus of the situation on himself, and thrust his own known energy and personal supervision in the face of comment. At least her success with him had brought her that—enough interest in herself to make him spare her husband, for she acknowledged boldly to herself that it was her own handling of this man during the past few weeks which had saved the situation to-night. Yesterday she might have daintily skirted the truth, but it seemed a small thing beside the bitter failure of her most intimate life. Gregory would spare Ally for his wife's sake, but—the Administrator having to ride to Maitso in place of his own A.D.C.! She almost laughed aloud with a sudden hysterical sense of humour.

"Oh, I shall go mad—mad!" she said desperately,

as the keenness of the humiliation stung her afresh. "It is all spoilt—all that I planned and worked to do. There is nothing but the Man left to me."

But with the word the bitterness passed as swiftly as it had come. The Man was left her, to guard and cherish if no longer to love, honour, and obey, for the positions were reversed. Her eyes filled with lovely tears, and all that was best and most maternal flooded the soreness from her heart. She could begin and love all over again—love as one loves a child, without looking for adequate return, less selfishly than a wife her husband; she could be strong for him, and putting her own craving for protection on one side, thrust her strength between his weakness and what life had to offer. Her very first trial would begin to-morrow, when she cringed to think of the shame awaiting his returning consciousness. She must help him through that first, and then arm him for the result of his folly with the world at large.

Leoline Lewin turned from the window, and quietly throwing off her wrapper, lay down on the bed and went as fast to sleep as if nothing had disturbed her rest. Part of her theory of life had been torn from her, and the sting of keen experience had wounded her into quicker life. But she was turning her face bravely to meet it, and stood up under the new stress of life to prove her womanhood.

CHAPTER VIII

"Le temps, l'innocence, la confiance, la foi, l'estime—perdez les —vous ne les recouvrerez plus."—*French Proverb.*

A CÉHO head is the best incentive to temporary canonisation that can well be experienced, and when, according to the old couplet, "The Devil was sick," and "A saint would be," he had probably been indulging on the preceding night in Key Island, whose temperature suggests that it is nearer to his dominion than the rest of the globe. Captain Lewin woke up on his improvised bed about half-past four next morning, and wondered if the swelled weight on the pillow were really his head or a leaden imitation fastened to his shoulders. To sleep in evening dress, too, in Key Island is hardly a profitable experiment, and what with the sheet spread over him and the liqueur he had swallowed, Ally's state was one of satisfactory discomfort.

He kicked off the sheet, and arose cursing. Then events began to come back to him, and as he staggered into an upright position—for he was very shaky—he looked at the mattress on the floor, and wondered who had mercifully arranged it for him last night. His memory declined to serve him beyond an uneasy recollection of a dark corner of the stoep at the Churtons' quarters, and Diana's stirrup cup. How he had got home he could not

tell, but the state of his mouth informed him ruefully that he had been very drunk indeed. Cého has a singular effect upon the glands of the throat, if taken in large quantities, so that a regular drinker gets a strange and unclassified disease after many years' tippling, which the doctors call "Drawn threads" for lack of a better name.

Alaric Lewin shuddered a little as he stumbled over to the door with some idea of closing it if it were open, and getting himself washed and dressed into the morning guise of a gentleman. He had known men with "Drawn threads," and wondered how soon the symptoms really showed themselves. But he need not have feared for his splendid young constitution, as yet, and a minute later he forgot the creepy thought in a new wonder.

The door of his dressing-room was bolted. So was the door into his wife's room, the latter on the inner side, for he tried it gently. Some one had seen him come in last night then, and had done their best for him, but he had no idea as to whether it were Chum or one of the servants. He hoped from the bottom of his soul that it was the latter, for the reaction from last night's excess was having a chastening effect. He was bitterly ashamed, and as he caught sight of his own face in the glass, a dark flush swept over his unwholesome pallor for an instant.

"Great Scot! I am a sickly beast," said Ally fervently, and with a rush of distaste for himself in his present condition he began to strip hastily, throwing the clothes aside after his usual careless fashion. His bath had been placed for him the night before, and he got into it with a feverish desire for cleanliness and coolness, but it seemed to him that the water hissed off his skin, and that even after a hard rub down there was a burning

heat upon him. He was sick and sorry too, and he knew enough of the climate to recognise that this would not do. He had no compunction in rousing his household, but he devoutly hoped that Chum might not hear him when he opened his door and called, for it is a peculiarity of Key Island, that though there is electric light there, there are no bells; every one shouts, and for this reason the servants get into a loafing habit of keeping round about the open doors, their possible summons being an excellent excuse for doing no work meanwhile.

By the time Mrs. Lewin came down to breakfast her husband was already in the room, as smart as usual, save for the drawn face above the spotless white linen. The heat seemed to get up as early as the residents in Key Island, and by eight o'clock the sun is as strong as at noon on an English June day. Leoline seemed to feel it oppressive, for she gasped a little as she came over to the table, and Ally turned sharply at the slur of her gown over the bare floor. The holland did not rustle, but she had a way of moving which was as regal as the action of a racehorse, and it created a certain stir of atmosphere about her. It struck Alaric at that moment that his wife was chic even in her night-dress, which is a costume resolving most women back into the original elements of their natures.

For a second they stood on either side the dainty table, and the embarrassment of the unconfessed lay deep between them. Then Alaric said "Good-morning, Chum," and moved into his place without raising his eyes. As a rule they kissed each other as heartily as when they were school-children.

Mrs. Lewin sat down opposite him and began to pour out the tea. The breaking of the ice rested with her, but she took it quite naturally; her new sense of responsibility seemed to make it an

expected thing that she must always from henceforth take the lead, not as she had hitherto taken it, with the screen of Ally's personality around her, but without disguise.

She looked at the honeycomb on the table, and observed that Abdallah had not remembered the butter-knife, an omission to be corrected for the seventeenth time. Then she pushed the dish of iced mangoes towards Ally mechanically, and then she caught her breath again, and spoke —

"You were very late down from the Churtons', Ally."

"Yes." He had had a whiskey-and-soda before breakfast, a "Hair-of-the-dog-that-bit-him" cure that enabled him to eat; but the food tasted badly in his mouth at that moment. "Did you hear me come in?" he said.

"Yes."

"You bolted the door, and got the mattress on to the floor, I suppose?"

"Yes."

There was a long pause, and it seemed as if the words would never come.

"I am awfully sorry, Chum."

"How was it?" she said, half under her breath. The troubled eyes of husband and wife met across the gay little table, glittering with their wedding silver and glass, and rich with strange tropical fruit and flowers. Ally and Chum had always revelled in the Key'land breakfast and their foreign dishes and luxuries,—somehow the sight of it between them now made what they had to say seem more tragic by contrast.

"It was so awfully hot!" Ally said lamely. "On my honour, it's a solitary instance. I haven't been squiffy like that except once or twice before in my life."

An uncomfortable memory of the Churtons' stoep was making him wretched, and the flavour of that episode tasted worse in his mouth than stale cého. He fidgeted with the fruit, while Chum on her side of the table was absorbed by the worse revelation that she had to make.

"Did you hear anything in town yesterday about the people being discontented?" she said, feeling the difficulty like a stone wall before her. "I asked you through the telephone, but you said no, then,—perhaps you knew of it later."

"No, I heard nothing. Is there anything fresh?" Ally was relieved at the change of subject.

"There was the threatening of a rising——"

"By Jove! was there? Come, that's exciting. Anything is welcome to break the monotony of this dead-alike hole! I shouldn't have made an ass of myself last night if it hadn't been for that," he said ruefully, drifting back to his own uneasy sense of shortcoming.

"I don't know whether anything happened. The Administrator thought——"

"Where did you see Gregory?" he asked, startled. "I got off early because he was going round to Port Albert until Friday. His yacht was waiting at the quay; I saw it as I rode through town."

"Then he must have heard something that made him change his mind, for he did not go. He came here last night, or rather in the early morning between one and two."

"Chum!"

He laid down his knife and fork and looked at her across the table, his face whitening. But it was the pity in her eyes, rather than a real understanding of what had happened, that frightened him.

"Did he want me?"

"Yes."

"He asked for me? What did you say?"

"I said you were ill—overtired—that I could not rouse you."

"And he took that, and went?"

A sense of marvel possessed his wife at the easy relief of his tone. He thought his difficulty so easily overcome that it seemed to her childish. Could he really think that a nature like Evelyn Gregory's would be so set aside, brushed off by a light excuse.

"Yes, he went—but——" She hesitated, and then it seemed that plain speaking was best. "He guessed what was wrong, Ally. He kept urging me to rouse you, and of course I could not. Then he said he would rouse you himself, and I had to stop him. He was very good—he spoke quite kindly, and told me not to worry—he would go to Maitso himself. But—I do not think he will forget, though things may seem as usual between you."

Down the length of the table, between the tall silver vases of stephanotis and honeysuckle, she saw his handsome, despondent face, the dark head leaning on his hand, the passing gravity which made him seem noble clouding out his usual laughter. Gravity and a touch of pensive regret suited Alaric as even his debonair self-assurance did not do. He had never looked handsomer than just then.

"I am very sorry. I have made a fool of myself." He spoke humbly, and yet somehow seemed more of a man than she had thought him since last night. "You are disappointed, Chum!"

"It's not my loss, Ally, it's yours. And it doesn't matter being disappointed if we can go on all right now. I think we can pull straight again, old fellow." She was pitifully anxious to help him,

and to get that look off his face that made her heart ache. He must be encouraged like a child, as well as chidden. She hated to see him carry his head without the usual insolence of his own good looks. As she poured out a second cup of tea for him—the "drawn threads" of his throat burnt like thirst—she rose and carried it round to him herself, with a kind young hand laid on his shoulder. The little extra attention, when he knew she might have reproached him, touched Alaric the more, because he looked on his wife as an undemonstrative woman. He turned swiftly from the table and laid his head against her breast with a boyish gesture. In truth, he wanted comforting, for he was face to face with his own responsible mistake, and fortune had petted and spoiled him hitherto rather than met him with the grim face she wore to-day. There was a little silence while Leoline stroked the dark hair, and held him tenderly against her. But her eyes looked out over his head with the expression of one who has gazed in the face of Medusa. She had that new protective feeling for something weaker than herself, but it was no longer the theoretical Ally she had married and set on a hymeneal pedestal.

"Don't, dear!" she said at last, and her voice was a whisper. "It is not a hanging matter—we won't let it be. I will help you—may I?"

"You're the best of Chums!" he whispered back with a rather uncertain smile. "But you shan't have to pull me up for boozing. I don't know how it happened last night—we were all playing Poker, and their quarters are so hot, and we kept on with whiskey after whiskey. I must have come down that hill like a madman!"

She gave a dismayed exclamation. "Did any one hear you?"

"Half the town I should think, and all our serv-

ants. It's no use not facing it, you know, and fellows have got drunk before."

"We must live it down anyhow, Ally. If only it had not been last night! And the Churtons know." She spoke in short, pausing sentences, thinking it out. "We don't know the real extent of the mischief until we hear whether the rising were anything serious."

A sudden passing gloom darkened his face again. "Gregory never forgives that kind of thing. Dear, this means ruin to any career for me!"

He rose impatiently, and began to stroll up and down the room, as though he could not sit still. After a minute she followed him, and put her arms round him, bringing him to a standstill. The warm, motherly look of love that had been in her eyes last night was there again as she lifted her head and looked at him.

"I don't care, darling, as long as we are side by side, and can help each other!" she said. "Only let us stand or fall together!"

The silent, golden day was unbroken by any whisper, but the two kissed each other gently for promise, and looked into each other's faces with a gravity too gentle for passion. While the best side of our nature is uppermost a vow seems almost superfluous. If reason will not bind us, a futile fear of our own oath is a poor alternative. Unfortunately, the best side of our nature so seldom remains in the ascendant, but has a disheartening tendency to give way before the baser instincts of the clay.

Alaric set off for Government House in a state of mind more angelic than comfortable. He felt as if the backbone had gone out of him with the wickedness, and his good resolutions were less easy to carry than his usual self-satisfaction. Nevertheless

it was a beautiful mood, and as genuine as any other while it lasted. He found that the Administrator had slept out at China Town at the house of the Town Warden. This was disturbing, and the impenetrable reserve of Mr. Halton's manner when they encountered each other for a few moments did not tend to soothe matters. Ally felt that to await he knew not what, and try to work, tended towards temporary insanity. At half-past eleven he ordered his pony, and rode down into Port Victoria.

There was no sign of disturbance there, but he felt that he could better have faced the town in ruins, and the coloured population howling and dancing the "Cannab Hari-kari," which is a dance of death, than the solitary figure of Evelyn Gregory which haunted his imagination. Why had the Administrator slept out at China Town? What was going on?

He lounged into the club, the fret of his nerves making the click of the billiard balls a torture. Two men were listlessly playing in the ugly bare room, where the sun beat past the stoep and through the glassless window slits. Ally watched the game for a few minutes, and then his restlessness drove him across the landing into the reading-room where no one ever read. Last month's papers still lay on the table, and a solitary member was writing at one of the neglected tables. Ally almost beat a retreat at sight of the square shoulders and dark head shot over with grey. No other man in Key Island wore and kept his collars as high and clean as the officer in command of the troops. With the temperature at 90° in the shade Major Churton was as coolly immaculate in glossy linen as if he were in Bond Street, and where lesser men succumbed to turned-down collars and porous shirts, his were triumphantly starched.

"Hulloa, Major!" Ally said, with an inward flinching from the encounter.

"Hulloa, Lewin!" The O.C.T. turned his hard brown face, and there was a twinkle in his bold eyes. "Got home all right last night, eh?"

A reaction of relief met the twinkle, in Ally's facile nature. "By Jove! I was drunk!" he said, laughing, as he dropped into a chair by the Major's side. "My mouth feels like a sponge to-day. Did I gas much? I owe Mrs. Churton an apology for such an exhibition in her house."

"You were a bit on. Nothing to hurt—unless your pony suffered! You went down that hill like greased lightning. I had no idea the brute had it in him—Polo knocks their feet about as a rule."

"Snapshot took me home—I certainly didn't take him. By the way, have you heard anything of any native trouble?"

"Yes, there was a scare, I believe. Gregory sent up a message that we must be ready to turn out, in the middle of the night, and rode to China Town afterwards. Nothing came of it, I presume—at least we have heard nothing more."

"My wife got wind of it. I haven't seen the Administrator." Ally's eyes were still troubled for all the easy assurance of the Major's tone.

"Of course there may be a row brewing at China Town," he said. "Even going on. We shan't hear till it's over, according to Mr. Gregory's usual methods. I think myself it was a false alarm."

"There's a telephone from the barracks to Burton's house, isn't there?" said Ally. "They may have heard something up at Maitso."

"All right, I'll ask Di." The Major rung up and curtly demanded to be connected with his house. After the usual trying delay Ally heard him say, "Oh, that you, Di?" and waited breathlessly.

"No," he remarked after a few brief questions and imaginable answers. "No news,—Di," his mouth was again at the tube—"Lewin is here. All the better for last night's temperance meeting! What?—Oh, Di wants you to come and lunch."

Now was Ally's good angel to fail him. He thought of the limp feeling that self-abasement gave him, and of how it would certainly season his luncheon with Chum's uncomplaining face opposite. He thought also, with a sense of injury, that she took his one excess very seriously, and that Churton himself made light of it. If he went to Maitso Diana would by no means have a chastening and depressing influence. Hang it! he had eaten humble pie enough for one morning, and been wretched into the bargain. No doubt he should have another bad quarter of an hour with Gregory; he would not be miserable from choice.

"All right—please say I shall be very pleased, if she is so charitable as to forgive last night."

"Oh, she will look on that with indulgence I have no doubt!" said Churton with some cynicism. "We are none of us total abstainers that we can accuse each other. Have a whiskey on the strength of that confession, Lewin!"

When Alaric rode up through the logwood screen, and pulled rein before the O.C.T.'s quarters, Mrs. Churton came forth to meet him with a friendly handshake, and no reference to the advance of last night. She was a skilful woman. The Major had come up before, so Diana had already heard of the supposed alarm, and guessed a good deal of Ally's part in it. She drew the rest of the story from him, new-coloured with the self-defence that had been growing on him all day, and was loud in her scorn of Gregory's eccentricities.

"He would like to turn the troops out now and

then on a false scent, to prove their smartness," she declared. "The men will mutiny next, if he sends any more such orders to Maitso, and then he will revel in a new row. He's like that—Bute was stationed with him once before. There's literally nothing in it but his usual fuss, and love of worrying a situation to rags. Gregory's a Prairie dog, and Halton's a cat—you can't trust what either of them says or does."

"It was unfortunate that he took a fit of it last night," Ally admitted, but he felt comforted, and Mrs. Churton's mental touch upon his nerves was more soothing, for the moment at any rate, than his wife's. He lingered on and on through the afternoon, and though he shunned actual stimulant he took many mental whiskies and sodas to keep himself up. By the time he rode home again to dinner his repentance of the morning had changed into a state of injury that the Administrator should raise false alarms, and upset a peaceful community. No more was known of Mr. Gregory's movements, save that he had returned to Government House, and still Port Victoria was quiet. It was obviously a false alarm and a fad of the man in power, and with a peculiar transposition of mind Captain Lewin no longer felt that he was the injurer in failing his chief at a crucial moment, but rather the injured party in that Mr. Gregory had chosen the one evening when he was—er—not up to the mark, to make demands upon him. The elasticity of his conscience was only equal to his capacity for avoiding unpleasant truth.

Poor Chum! she was writing her new creed on sand, and when she saw her teaching briefly reflected on the surface of his mind, she thought that it was permanent, and did not realise her own disaster.

CHAPTER IX

"Il n'y a que le premier pas qui coute."—*French Proverb.*

The Commissioner, in company with Mrs. Arthur White and the Colonial Treasurer, was booked for England in the next steamer that called at Key Island. The mail came in once a month, but occasionally an alteration of route would bring lesser boats to the great coaling-station as well as the cruisers, and Mr. Halton plainly said that he would go in a tin kettle of a tramp rather than wait longer than was necessary. His work being finished, the Commissioner found no reason for lingering. There was indeed a sting in Mr. Halton's secret consciousness that made Key Island the more distasteful. His rides and walks and dilettante attendances on Mrs. Lewin were no more, for he was superseded by a stronger personality and writhed to face the failure of his life in a new form. Something of the feline nature that Diana Churton had bluffly discerned was uppermost in him also, and he waited for a mental pounce since he was no longer purring under a soft hand. A small man is infinitely more dangerous to irritate than his brother of a larger nature, because he deals with details, and the trivialities that go to make up tragedies are his province. Halton was waiting, though not consciously, to avenge himself for the fact that he had allowed the Administrator to displace him with Mrs. Lewin, and

act cavalier in an uncouth method of his own; and there was no weak spot in their armour that could have escaped him. But Chum, having nothing to conceal, was not a remunerative study, and the Commissioner fretted in vain until the rains came down and blotted out Port Victoria for a space during which he lost even the contemplation of his annoyance, for when the Heavens open the social life is paralysed.

September brought back the sunshine, and the Gilderoys gave a picnic. Being the herald of renewed amusement, it had an air of festivity that most like entertainments lacked in their deadly monotony. Every one went, from Maitso out to Mitsinjovy, and Mrs. Lewin put on her last new muslin gown and looked at herself in the glass with mingled satisfaction and regret. She had ridden and danced and picnicked through the remainder of her big trunks in the last six months, for muslin is perishable and silk goes rotten in those latitudes; and Key Island knew the very pattern of her laces save this last white wonder with its unutterable frills and the grace of fancy sleeves. Leoline was a woman whose figure gave one the idea of one lovely line swept off harmoniously from throat to heel. She might wear muslins made on anybody's pattern, but they became her own muslins by immediate association, and followed the fall of her lissome body as though they loved her.

"Just come and choose my hat, Ally," she called through the dressing-room door, and Alaric's broad shoulders and smooth head followed her summons dutifully. There was no outward difference between husband and wife; the same easy relations existed between them that made Mrs. Lewin's nickname of "Chum" typical, the same surface confidence that caused Ally to staunchly assert to Mrs.

Churton that his married life was entirely satisfactory, and he himself a beast. The qualification marked the advance of their intimacy. But in her heart Mrs. Lewin knew that she was altering; some new strong development was taking place in the very fibres of her nature, and the transformation was a painful process to herself at any rate. It was even a different face that she saw in the glass as Ally looked over her shoulder and condemned her choice.

"Not that chiffon thing, Chum, surely. Aren't you going to wear a habit?"

"It's too hot. Besides, I wish to leave a good impression on Mr. Halton's mind, and this is his last festivity. He leaves next week, and takes the memory of my muslin with him. Isn't it pretty?"

"Damfino! as the *Pink'un* used to say—or was it the *Referee?* It's new too, isn't it?"

"My last. Why don't you like that hat? Will my Panama do?"

"That's better. Who will ride with you, Chum? Halton?"

"Major Churton, I think. With a possible reversion to Brissy."

"Why not Gregory's Powder? Think of my interests!"

"He is not coming with us, but will turn up at our destination. He has business that will keep him down at the office until later," said Mrs. Lewin without hesitation over the Administrator's plans, for she knew them, and knew also deeper reasons for them, which she did not tell Ally—reasons that fed the activity of her mind, and to which she listened with the faithfulness of a tried friend. For when Gregory laid the heavy weight of his confidence gradually upon her, he bound her with a chain whose iron links she hardly felt more than silken as yet.

Ally accepted her information as more infallible than an official telegram. "The O.C.T. has his innings first then," he added. "Hurry, Chum! I told them to saddle up."

Mrs. Lewin thrust a last fierce hatpin into her Panama, and put up her hand to settle the hairpins at her neck. If was four o'clock, and they were due at the rendezvous at half-past, for this was a late picnic which began in the afternoon and ran on into nightfall. Such excursions can be planned for two periods of the day—early morning, or when the sun is losing its power, but between those hours lies the Miroro, when no white man may work or play. A morning picnic sets out before seven, breakfasts up on the hills, and buries itself in the heart of the woods during the day's heat, emerging again at four for the return to dinner and iced drinks; but it means a long strain on the endurance of the guests' attraction for each other, and the Gilderoys were wise in their generation and chose the shorter method.

At the foot of Maitso the Lewins fell in with Halton on his way from Government House, and Brissy Nugent hot from a canter from Mitsinjovy, where he had been lunching. The four ponies turned sturdily to the ascent, and Mrs. Lewin looked at the streaked flanks of Ally's mount, and thanked Heaven for the blanket under her saddle, for Liscarton's wet sides did not agree with her frills. There had been, to her secret amusement, a brief struggle between Halton and Nugent as to who should ride beside her, and the soldier's more brazen tactics had won the coveted place. Brissy was not thin-skinned, and that Halton shrugged his shoulders mentally, and classified him as still an unlicked cub, did not trouble him so much as it would have done to be proved the weaker man.

Mrs. Lewin laughed silently, and as usual found reason for enjoyment in her immediate present. Afterwards it seemed as if every detail of that day were cruelly impressed on her memory, and she never could forget one. Even the garrison jokes that Brissy told her in doubtful taste, and at which she had learned the futility of frowning, remained in her mind long after things she would fain have kept had drifted from her. She could remember the very smell from the vegetation which had overgrown the road during the recent rain, and turning in her saddle to look down and see the satin blue bay and the roofs of the crazy little town, whose zinc shone like a glare of silver in the sunshine. Beyond Mitsinjovy the Left Gate stood out like a vast sentinel, shutting out the sea and the horizon, but from Maitso Hill they could only see the cone of the Right Gate rising over their own position. Below them in the harbour the great walls of coal looked nothing but toy-mounds and black lines, and the mass of shipping was but a detail in the picture.

Often as she had seen that view Mrs. Lewin was vaguely conscious of seeing it afresh that day, and the row of ravenalas outside the Churtons' quarters, too, struck her as they never had before, while there seemed a new suggestion that she could not grasp in the two mounted figures themselves, waiting motionless in the logwood shade. Diana was at her best in the saddle, but the Major, who could have ridden down any man present, looked too large for a Key Island pony. Even at the moment Leoline Lewin wondered that she noticed these things, and seemed possessed of a novel alertness, a keener sense of observation than ever before, as though her mental life had quickened. She always thought of the Gilderoys' picnic as the last occasion

on which she wore muslin appropriately. She liked to be in sympathy with her gowns, and she never again felt the adequate frivolity for the dainty frills she laid aside that night. Life seemed to have gone too deep for muslins from that time forth—a foolish fancy, but one that made the successful little frock something of a relic.

"How are you, Chum? The Gilderoys are waiting at the top of the hill," Diana called out strongly. "Half the Station is up there already. Wait a minute—here comes the Denver girl and Gurney."

Mrs. Lewin looked at Major Churton, and sat still.

"An invitation with R. S. V. P. in the corner," said the Major succinctly to himself, and went straight to his goal in characteristic fashion. "Do I ride with you, Mrs. Lewin?"

"I will trust you to go first!" said Chum gaily. "There will be no riding with any one if I know the path we are taking. The ponies slide down on their tails the other side of Maitso, for I am sure we are going over the Pass and towards Rano."

"The Gilderoys are fools if they do," he said, as they fell into the procession side by side. "Do you know what Rano means, by the way?"

"I am not quite ignorant, Major! It means water in Malagasy, and is given to that range of hills because of the many springs there—have I learned my geography lesson rightly? How lovely the Rano Falls are, by the way! We rode out there just before the rains."

"Yes, and they will be rather more than lovely just now! Does the name suggest nothing to your mind?"

"You think the floods will be up?" Mrs. Lewin asked startled.

"I think the Rano District will probably be impassable just now, but we will see." His keen eyes fell on the couple in front of them, who were Mr. Gurney and Miss Denver, and he laughed. "That young lady is a puzzle to the garrison," he said. "The women cannot decide if she is a bad lot or only a little fool."

"It is her people's fault. They let her ride about with the boys stationed here up to twelve at night, and she spends half her time at Mitsinjovy with Mrs. Clayton. What can you expect? Of course people talk. But I think she is quite capable of taking care of herself."

"I don't know. This affair with Gurney outshines her former little peccadilloes. She has the worried air of a girl who has been kissed!"

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself for knowing such things!" retorted Chum quickly. "Perhaps they are engaged. I know nothing of Mr. Gurney beyond his voice. He may be all right."

"Or she may be all wrong! I would solve the mystery in three minutes—if I were a bachelor. As things are I do not feel inclined to help to satisfy public curiosity."

"I don't like you nearly so well when you talk scandal," said Mrs. Lewin frankly. "And you so very seldom do it that it jars the more. The girl is not able to defend herself either. Don't let us attack her without cause."

There had been ample cause, in so far as a foundation for gossip went, and she knew it in her own mind, even while she defended a fellow-woman. It flashed across her, with a sense of absolute wonder, that she could not imagine such a position as Miss Denver's—a girl accepted in the social world of the place, asked to people's houses, and spoken of by men as Major Churton had spoken!

Leoline Lewin could not quite realise the tone of mind in Beatrix Denver, if she could allow herself to be handled, not by one man only, but by many, if report spoke truly. She herself had never been kissed by any man until her engagement, and felt that she would have a certain shyness in the admission after other women's avowed experience. It seemed rather immature, somehow. And yet the mere thought of familiarity, even in her present assured position, appeared an impossibility to her sense of self-valuation. Of course she could not soil her own self-respect by such a thing, though she kept her charity for those who were less particular. Last week, for instance, Di Churton had told her that the very Mrs. Clayton, who was Miss Denver's chief ally at the Mitsinjovy Garrison, had got the new boy from Natal in tow. He was rather a nice youth named Rennie, as Mrs. Lewin knew him, with little harm as yet in his twenty-one years; but his education had begun in earnest.

"He runs after Mrs. Clayton everywhere," Diana declared. "She takes him home after the dances, and he unlaces her gowns for her. Brissy Nugent told me so."

"What a pity he didn't stay with the first battalion in Natal," was all Mrs. Lewin had said. But in her own mind she drew a line of demarcation between herself and Mrs. Clayton as unconsciously pharisaical as though they were of different castes. She was thinking of this now, as she rode over to Maitso, in the wake of Mr. Gurney and Miss Denver, and her mood was tolerant because she was too clear-brained to take a narrower position. These people did not really matter in hers and Ally's lives; their vulgarity need not affect her, though she lived in touch with them for a period. By and by they would drop out of her existence,

and she would pass on to something cleaner, unsmutched.

On the crest of the hill they joined the rest of the party, which had become gradually augmented, so that between twenty and thirty ponies turned off to the right in single file, and followed a precipitous path into the hills. A rough cart, borrowed from the garrison, and drawn by six stamping, vicious mules, had gone on ahead with the provisions, by a longer but less dangerous route. As Mrs. Lewin had predicted, the ponies had to slide when they could not walk, and the descent into the next valley was like a winding stair. To the right the steep precipice fell sheer down to a flat green bottom overgrown with logwood and guava—what the Planters called "dirty land," because it had not been "cleaned" for sugar-cane or banana. The path was so slight a track that Major Churton, riding in front of Chum, had often to push a way for her through the eager vegetation. Above the cleft hills and the valley smiled the blue sky, washed clean by the rains, and from all sides rose the breath of the still moist earth.

"This is like riding in a vapour bath," said Mrs. Lewin, gasping a little, as the cavalcade emerged from the trees for a moment and met the freer air of the hillside. "Major Churton, you were right—the streams are in flood!"

Her exclamation was echoed by a cry of dismay from the vanguard of the party, for the curve of the hill had revealed the impassable volume of water to them. A regular cascade, which in dry weather was nothing but a shallow stream, was tearing down the hill at a lower level, and cutting off the valley land from their advance. The string of ponies stopped, and there ensued an argument which was, of course, shouted up and down the hill as to a

change of route. Here and there a pony fretted on the bit, and brought his hind legs dangerously near the edge of the track; once a woman shrieked—it was Miss Denver's voice, pitched to an hysterical tone that made Mrs. Lewin's pulses leap with sudden dread for her—and an occasional "Woa, boy!" "Steady, mare!" showed that somebody's mount resented the delay. It struck Mrs. Lewin how strange the string of ponies must look from below, dotted along the hillside, and she laughed—she remembered that, too, afterwards as something uncanny. There are days on which we seem to have been too prodigal of laughter, and to have squandered it for little reason.

"Well, we must ride on and get somewhere," said Mrs. Gilderoy's exasperated voice at last. "There's a way round; we must take that, and follow the cart."

"But I told Mr. Gregory the short cut!" protested her husband blankly. "He will be sure to come this way. Will he think of the other road?"

"He must, unless he is an arrant fool," said Mrs. Gilderoy, with refreshing candour, and no respect for the representative of the British Government. "No one can cross that stream without getting wet to the waist. We must ride on. You don't want to wait until he turns up, I suppose?"

Some echo of the altercation passed down the line of riders and troubled the air around Mrs. Lewin. She said nothing, but a new silence seemed to have fallen upon her as Liscarton at last pricked his ears and followed his leader with obvious satisfaction. There was no fear that any one who knew the country as Gregory did would attempt impossible feats; the probability was that he might grasp the situation much sooner than they had done, and, not knowing what they had decided, turn round and go

home. Mrs. Lewin's mind felt a sudden blank; she was looking forward to meeting him to-day, after an absence of nearly a week, to catch some hint of his plans that would not yet be public property. It was still a matter of some scornful marvel to Leoline Lewin that every one round her openly lamented their lot in being bound to Key Island, for she did not realise that her own vitality was being kept up by a vivid interest. She was living much more actively in a mental fashion than she had ever done in her life before, and the island itself, that she thought the object round which her forces gathered, was in reality only a background. But as yet she felt no hint of danger.

The party camped out at last on the bank of the very stream which had hindered their progress, and which had given them an extra half-hour's ride. The cart was awaiting them, and the men tethered the ponies and helped outspan, while the women laid the cloth. There was no kettle to boil, or tea to make, as in a cooler climate; but the ice had stood the journey well, and the soda-water and mangoes came on as cold as if served at Government House. Mrs. Lewin seated herself on a fallen tree with Major Churton's handkerchief spread over it as a safeguard for her frills, and fell to swizzling tinned butter with milk in the interests of the company. At her feet Brissy, in an attitude as condensed as a monkey's, was slicing salad with dangerous activity. The group was gathered on open ground beyond the absolute tangle of wood which clothed the hillside, and which was still reeking from the rains.

"Pass the spiders, please!" said Chum absently, her eyes on the back of Captain Nugent's flat head, where the black hair curled crisply. He looked up with a laugh in the young eyes that had seen too

much of this marvellous universe, and his white teeth flashed under his moustache.

"You're dreaming, Mrs. Lewin!"

For once Chum's control of her blood failed her, and she flushed a little, conscious that he told the truth. Her thoughts were with Gregory and his probable prudence in turning back.

"It was appropriate, anyhow!" she retorted, shaking a huge specimen off her skirts. "That's not a tarantula, is it?"

"No; common or garden bug, I think. Let's put it on Miss Denver's shoulder and hear her scream!"

"No, Captain Nugent! Stop!" A sharp memory of the hysterical quality of Miss Denver's cry on the hillside made Chum the more imperious. Even in her own mind she did not form the fear that a very little would upset the girl's balance to make men suspicious of she knew not what; all she felt was that Miss Denver was not in a state of nerves for the endurance of spiders. There might be nothing in it, but she remembered with faint disgust Major Churton's broad comment, "She has the worried look of a girl who had been kissed." Mrs. Lewin dropped the subject, and the spider together, with distaste. Her mental attitude grew a little contemptuous.

The next instant she had risen silently to her feet with a nearer and more bitter interest. Some one had said, "Have a cého, Ally?"—and she threaded her way through the chattering crowd round the table-cloth to the three men standing apart by the tethered ponies, without haste, and with a complete appearance of her errand being her own need.

"Ally, do get me some soda water!" said her voice behind her husband, as he vacillated on the brink of consent. "I can't wait for our meal to be

ready, I'm so thirsty. And don't put anything but ice into it; it's too hot."

Her candid eyes met his without a shadow of reproach; yet he coloured ever so slightly, and shook his head at the man who had suggested cého. As he halved the soda-water between them, Chum felt the old humiliation sweep back over her with fresh force. Who was she to think herself and Ally above these neighbours of theirs? With this ugly possibility always dodging her steps, she was a woman who dared not leave her husband to judge for himself, but was forced to risk an interference that might be rightly interpreted at any moment! She stood there in dispirited silence, beautiful in her summer gown, but with earnest eyes that seemed out of place above the dainty muslin; and for one mad moment she could have cursed the weakness of the man beside her which had spoiled her ideal.

And it was just as she turned from him to save suspicion of her errand, that a sound of welcome arose from the group round the table-cloth.

"When did you turn up?"—"How wet you are? You must have swum the stream!"—"There's a compliment for you, Mrs. Gilderoy—nothing would keep him away!"—"Well, you always were a man who surmounted difficulties!"

It was Gregory, and his high riding boots were dripping with water; but he laughed at the idea of cold. The pony took the stream at a point he knew of, he said; there was no danger—only a ducking, to which he was used. He had been riding all through the rains, and forded worse floods.

He was standing as Mrs. Lewin came back to the group, and remained so until she had sat down; then he took a seat near her, but rather behind her

back, so that they could hardly be called companions. It would have been difficult to talk to her indeed, and she directed her conversation rather to Halton, who was facing her at a little distance. His brown eyes were very constantly on her face, and she parried their sentimentality with vague distrust. His departure was lending a new meaning to their old intimacy, and she had no room for it in her present life. Her fear for Ally, and her desire to hear if Gregory had any news, kept her mind at sufficient stretch. She enjoyed the mental activity in some strange fashion, in spite of the thread of pain running through it; but her increasing appetite for power was not fed by the sentimental half-tones of her relations with Halton.

As the conversation grew more general she was conscious of listening for a whisper behind her. Miss Denver's laugh was loud above the rest. Some one challenged Hamilton Gurney to sing, and he affectedly refused for the sake of being pressed, but the voice he wanted did not join in the appeal. Mrs. Lewin was not conscious that they were urging him to anything in fact, for through the babel the Administrator had leaned forward and asked her for more bread and butter. She passed it back to him, and as he took it his voice breathed a whisper in her ear —

"I have heard from Capetown."

She dared not turn her head, but her nerves seemed strung as if by a strong stimulant. He folded the bread and butter deliberately, while she still held the plate, and his voice went on rapidly —

"They have given me *carte blanche* to do as I please."

Mr. Gurney had given up the hope of any persuasion coming from Mrs. Lewin, and as he really wanted to sing, he screwed up the melancholy

banjo which he had sent on in the cart, and twanged an accompaniment. The first notes fell on deaf ears as far as Leoline was concerned, for her mind buzzed with possibilities. She had never dreamed that the Capetown Government would put such power into a man's hands which the Home Authorities had carefully tied. But she forgot how small a dot Key Island appeared to the larger State, already worried with its own affairs. *Carte blanche* meant that Gregory might get to the root of the hashish trouble by burning the crops, or any other drastic measure, and this would be followed by probable consequences for which she knew some of his plans. He was nearer to the grip of his tiny kingdom, at which he aimed, than he had been two months ago. Mrs. Lewin drew her breath as if something had almost taken it away. She was excited and roused, and her blood was on fire. . . .

Then Gurney's voice stole in on her attention, loosening the restraint of her will-power still more in its subtle sweetness. Between the rush of two unusual emotions she felt bewildered, and clutched blindly after her usual self-control. Her eyes threatened to fill with ridiculous tears, and half-a-dozen men and women would see and misinterpret them. She flung herself a little into the shadow of a tree, leaning back with her hand on the ground behind her to support herself. It enabled her to turn her face so that she hoped it was partly masked.

"All ye who seek for pleasure,
Here find it without measure—
No one to say
A body nay,
And naught but love and leisure!"

Something hotter than tears seemed to flash across Leoline Lewin's eyeball; the universe stood still,

soundless and sightless, then rushed on with clangor, and drowned every sound save the little trivial song which still tinkled so loudly in her stunned soul, . . . for Evelyn Gregory had leaned back also, and laid his hand heavily over hers as it rested on the ground, out of sight of every one in the group. During the shock of the first five seconds she thought that he had done so unconsciously, and that the movement had been as natural as her own. She dared not move for fear of making him conscious, and waited for him to remove the heavy pressure that she might slide her own away, and never refer to it. . . . The seconds went on and on, each that passed accentuating a new beautiful terror and conviction in her mind. He did not move. Human flesh cannot press human flesh and be unconscious for so long. Her blood leapt to the revelation that they were man and woman, and felt, too, the humiliation of knowing that they were not sexless as friends.

"All ye whose hearts are aching
For somebody forsaking,
We'll hold you dear
And heal you here,
And send you home love-making!"

Gregory removed his hand and sat up, as self-controlled as though he had never moved. An echo down the valley faintly took up the last pure notes and repeated them afar off—

"Love-making!"

Chum drew her knees up and clasped her hands round them as though she would gather her forces together; but as she did so her eyes fell on the back of her hand, where a faint red flush marred the white skin. It told tales of the rough pressure she had

endured to her maddened mind, and she dropped it again to the ground—but this time out of reach—beside her. She glanced round the ring of faces and found no answering consciousness there. They were all trying the echo—shouting nonsense up the valley on the quiet evening air. She looked at Halton, and saw that he was looking down, apparently the most abstracted person present. But with a pang of fear she wondered if she would have read knowledge in the eyes veiled by his drooped lids. She was frightened, not only for herself, but for that other behind her, her woman's intuition recognising the danger that lay under Halton's quiet, and with characteristic courage she walked straight up to her danger to look it in the face.

"Are you going to ride home with me, Mr. Halton?" she contrived to say, as the ponies were saddled up for the return.

"If you have made no other arrangement?" he said tentatively. There was nothing to take hold of in the words, because Major Churton had ridden with her before, and might claim the privilege again. But she caught a covert insinuation and scored up an unpaid grudge against him.

"I am not using you to escape an unwelcome cavalier!" she said, as if accepting his own idea.

"What an unpleasant suggestion! I shall be wondering all the way which man is thirsting for my blood."

"It would be a better compliment if you took it for granted that they were all envious. You are out of practice, Mr. Halton."

"I have had none of late."

"Never mind; use the present opportunity on my gown!"

"It is charming, of course!" he said, as he ar-

ranged the blanket over Liscarton's streaked shoulders, and pulled the girth tight. "And no other lady would have dared to risk it on a hot pony, would they?"

"I told my husband that I wished to leave a good impression on your mind!"

"Really? But why struggle for the inevitable? I am all the more flattered though, of course. It is not every day that a lady makes herself smart for my especial benefit."

"Oh, please don't!" said Chum, as she lifted herself easily into the saddle. "Smart is now a word sacred to the middle classes, to whom it means inferior silks and strings of imitation beads!"

"So bad as that?"

"Yes, really. And the same degree of cheapness is expressed in the word 'clever'—its mental equivalent. Perhaps on the whole it is best summed up in the draper's ideal of one and elevenpence halfpenny!"

"I am so glad you did not say three farthings!"

"We never have such things now," sighed Mrs. Lewin. "There *is* a farthing, of course—but they are rapidly becoming relics. You get a packet of very bad pins, or a pencil that you particularly don't want, for the odd number."

His laugh sounded like the earlier terms of their acquaintance, and she congratulated herself on her stroke of policy in reannexing him for this occasion. Never once had her eyes met Gregory's since that revelation during Gurney's song, and she had not spoken to him. As they rode back through the falling dusk she fenced with Halton as of old, retreating and advancing like the figure of a mental quadrille, and was surprised to find it tedious. Had the stronger personality that was even now shadowing her made the other man seem slight, or was

Halton only attractive to a certain point, after which he could only repeat himself? It seemed to her that realities had superseded the dilettantism of their brain flirtations, and made them a tiresome waste of time.

As they rode through Port Victoria, and turned off on the Government House road, she missed Ally and learned that he had ridden home with his chief, and would come on to the bungalow afterwards, doubtless.

"I saw them turn up the avenue; they were in front of us," Halton said quietly. "Did you not see them?"

She thought he looked at her.

"I don't always see my husband!" said Mrs. Lewin adroitly. "Life would be so fatiguing if one could not sometimes close one's eyes, wouldn't it?"

"Or substitute another object?" said Halton, as they drew rein. "The mail comes in to-morrow, and I expect to leave in her the day after, Mrs. Lewin. But I hope this is not good-bye?"

"I am coming to see you off, of course! I will bring you one of Ally's pocket handkerchiefs."

"To wave, or to weep in?"

"Whichever you prefer. Personally, I want to murder people who weep over me; but if you like it, I will imitate the late rains."

"I would not cost you a tear!" he said, with a sudden note of feeling in his voice that vaguely surprised her. "If your future were in *my* hands, there would be very little fear for it."

He rode away into the darkness without any further farewell, while Mrs. Lewin pondered his words with a fresh misgiving. When Ally came in half-an-hour later, he told her—as he usually did when it was so—that Halton had been speaking of her.

"I hope he was admiring me!" said Chum brightly. "But he could hardly do less—to you."

"He said you were very clever!" said Ally doubtfully. Who likes his wife to be called clever?

"One and elevenpence halfpenny!" murmured Chum absently. "I did hope I was worth two shillings, anyway."

"And sma——"

"Ally, if you say smart *too*, I shall have Mr. Halton up for libel!" said Mrs. Lewin indignantly.

Ally laughed. "Gregory's Powder didn't say anything," he remarked. "I don't think you've made much impression there, in spite of your earnest efforts, you know, Chum."

Mrs. Lewin looked down absently at the back of her hand, almost as if she expected to see something there; but her real answer came later, as she kissed her husband and said good-night.

"Ally," she said slowly, turning back at the door, "do you mind? It's so hot to-night! And you are restless, and have kept me awake lately!"

Alaric finished his whiskey and soda rather soberly. "Oh!" he said. "All right. I'll sleep in the dressing-room——"

He heard Leoline enter her own room and turn the key in the lock, and he wondered in his stupid handsome head that she should so insist on privacy. Then he cheered up, had another whiskey, and supposed she had a headache. A man may distrust his mistress if she locks him out, and knows how to translate his own inclination to sleep in the dressing-room. But the *tertium quid* of his wife's case is always a headache.

CHAPTER X

"Ce que femme veut, Dieu le veut."—*French Proverb.*

The restless, tropical night seemed full of wings to Leoline's ears as she lay on her back with hands clasped under her fragrant hair, and her wide eyes looking up into the bridal fall of the mosquito net. In spite of being alone she had gained no hint of sleep, nor had she expected it. The heat was intense, even though the bungalow was some way above the town up on the hillside, and the heaviness of the rains still seemed to hang in the air. The complaining, vicious note of a mosquito haunted the safe curtains, through which he could not find an entrance; and, as if in contempt of him, Leoline had flung off the covering sheet, and where the soft frills fell back her white body tempted the angry insect with sweets out of reach. It would have been a pity to mark that perfect skin; but the mosquito thought of his own desire above all artistic considerations—just as that much higher creation called Man might do if, for instance, he wished to feel the pressure of his own hand on hers.

Mrs. Lewin was hardly thinking as the long hours wore to morning, and the flutter of moths' wings gave way to that of humming-birds, who had built their nests below the stoep,—she was simply suffering. It seemed to her that her mind

was one blind pain and a bewildering humiliation. For it was not the thing in itself that horrified her —a man's hand laid over hers for some sixty seconds seemed a trivial thing enough—but what it meant. She who had unconsciously put herself on a pedestal, found that she had fallen, not by the unimportant act but by the revelation it had brought of her own emotions. She had not been cool under Gregory's touch; if she had she would have brushed the incident aside as a thing of no consequence, tiresome but to be disregarded; her blood had answered his, and beat in her veins, and made her whole body thrill and sicken as no touch had ever done before. A knowledge that she could no longer deny to herself dismayed her, showing her this first touch as the prelude to more that she dared not contemplate. It was the thin end of the wedge, the passing of a boundary line to a path that might lead her—anywhere. She knew it, and in the warm, soft darkness she did not lie to herself as she might have done in the decent day. A married woman is somewhat defenceless against herself, for she is forced to acknowledge her own emotions, and has legitimised their classification. While she is unmarried—whether by law or slighter bonds—she can theorise, but she can always excuse herself by saying that she does not know the meaning of her sex. Nor in a certain degree does she. It is, however, her husband's useful province to deprive her of such a defence, and to make her horribly conscious of the meaning of starting pulses and too generous blood.

Ally had once told Chum, with a chuckle, that she took to married life as a duck takes to water. And, in truth, she did not quarrel with nature any more than any other healthy, clear-minded wife whose womanhood is ripe. But there was a nicety

about her that was content to look on passion as a thing incidental to married life, but not to be dwelt upon, and her bodily relations with Alaric had never seemed to her of so much importance as those of her mind. There was again a hint of superiority in this, for she saw other women holding out grosser inducements to charm than she professed, and made a somewhat fastidious use of her physical advantages by contrast.

For once, and quite suddenly, it seemed to her that this attitude had after all been false. If she wore her frocks with a daintier grace than other women, did it not suggest that what lay beneath was daintier too? She thought with disgust of Mrs. Clayton's bodices being actually unlaced; but her own bodices had been quite as tempting to the audacity of men's thoughts, and she had meant them to be so. It was only that she promised and did not perform, while other women enjoyed the fulfilment of their own allurements. No man could say a word of her as they might of Beatrix Denver; but how many had envied Ally to the extent of fancying themselves in his place for one wicked blissful moment? And she had regarded that as legitimate, and a rightful compliment to them both.

Oh, but what did it matter, compared to this new fire in her veins—this mad possibility of painful happiness that was surely not sane, for she could find no reason to excuse it. Every yearning instinct of her, brain, body, and soul, seemed drawn out, beyond her power to will to restrain it, to a man who was not her husband, and who had not even such attractions as might excuse a physical passion. She thought of Ally's handsome face, and easy, comfortable personality, contrasted with Evelyn Gregory's harsh features and difficult

nature. There would be nothing comfortable in a life with Gregory, unless indeed a woman were so at one with him as for their two personalities to harmonise without a discordant note. He would be overbearing and exacting, but strong both for himself and her; there came the renewed leap of heart, as all the woman in her craved for a master. She was tired of her disillusion, and of being the one to guide and act both at once. Gregory had appealed to her through the feeling of reliance with which he had filled her. There had been the snare and the excuse, if an excuse were possible for a feeling which seemed to her outside the pale of argument.

"What does it matter," she thought wearily, "since I am proved a fraud on all accounts. I am not what I thought I was—all my theories with regard to myself seem to have been mere vapours to vanish with the first ray of sun. But I can fight still—I can—I can."

She set her little white teeth, and gripped the pain as though it were a tangible thing. And then, because she was just a good girl and no heroine, she threw aside the mosquito net and knelt down beside the bed to pray to a God whom she believed had sent an ugly tragedy into her life, not to take it away, but to help her to hide it after the fashion of women. She was ready to trust Him where she no longer trusted herself, and having certain sturdy principles born and bred in her, she had not even the advantage of excusing self-indulgence upon the plea of possessing the "artistic temperament," which is a very convenient back door for immorality to the modern woman. It generally means lack of exercise and hysteria; but Leoline Lewin's digestion being a good one, she had no claim to such an immunity from inconvenient virtue.

Towards morning she fell asleep, but not into the same sound oblivion as on the night when Ally lay in a drunken slumber next door. She could control her waking thoughts, but her dreams were cruel, and were haunted by such forbidden joy as made her glad when the broad sun struck through the venetian shutters and brought the sick, hot day.

The mail came in that morning, and all Port Victoria went down to the harbour to meet it. The town was cut off from all save chance communication with the outer world for a whole month, and so the arrival of news was a greater event than in a larger colony. The wharf was a rendezvous, therefore, on mail days, and the U.C.L. officers of the incoming boat could have laid themselves up with cého in the first half-hour, if they had accepted all the hospitality offered them, and drunk the liqueur fast enough. Leoline rode down to town early, and sat patiently on Liscarton's back among the coal-dust and the smell of fessikh, or salted fish, which is as the smell of unutterable decay, and believed by many to be nothing but dried nigger, and high game at that. The little colony gathered gradually about her, and for the first time the sameness of the faces struck her with a kind of horror. She had met them over and over again, and they had not so oppressed her; now she realised that there were only some forty white people in the immediate neighbourhood to know, and that she must go on meeting them for all the remainder of the time that Ally was stationed there, until the social life seemed like a circle. There were one or two newer faces out at China Town, or Port Albert, perhaps,—a Planter or so scattered beyond the Pass or up on the Table-land; but even these belonged to the same community. She looked at the blue bay, the forest of masts, the one big ship at the quay, the line of

ravenalas along the shore with their lifted fans like spread fingers, the warm wooded hills that shut it all in,—and Halton's words returned to her with meaning for the first time.—

"We are in a rat-trap!"

A sort of terror seized her, a feeling that she must get away from the dangerous monotony of it all. She could face and wrestle with the situation threatening her at the moment, while her senses were still alert with the shock of her awakening; but how would it be as the months rolled on, and time inevitably lessened her sense of danger and dulled her watchfulness! She began to realise that Ally had not been all to blame for his weakness, and that Miss Denver had no other distraction for her idle days; they might both be of feebler natures than her own, but at least there were extenuating circumstances. She could think that with broader possibilities they might have made a better fight for it.

"We are in a rat-trap!"

She looked round her slowly, at the familiar figures in the flaccid sunlight, and wished that she did not know every face turned to her. The very smile that came inevitably as their eyes met seemed a weary proof of having them before her yesterday, and to-day, and to-morrow. There was Mrs. Gilderoy, in an old riding skirt that smacked forlornly of Bond Street long ago, and a limp white shirt; there was her husband, equally inevitable, in a grey flannel suit, with a Madras helmet hiding his face down to the ragged tawny moustache. As if by common consent they made straight for Leoline, who was seized with a wild impulse to pull Liscarton round and ride out of the sameness of the scene. She even thought she knew the very words they said before they uttered them.

"How are you, my dear?" Mrs. Gilderoy spoke first. "Anything left of you from yesterday? I shall take a month to recover. I always wonder, after we have exerted ourselves like that to bore our friends, why we did it. So does Wray; he thinks he lost several pounds from that ride down to the valley."

"I felt it dripping away," said Captain Gilderoy in his pleasant voice. "I have lost something like three stone since I came to this abominable hole."

"It was a terribly hot night," said Chum, striving for her usual manner by instinct. "I think the heat increases."

"It does not vary much in the tropics," said Mrs. Gilderoy, shrugging her shoulders. "I have not been dry for eighteen months, but I am growing used to it. Oh, how I envy the Commissioner! Think of going Home, and the East winds, and sitting on deck to wait for the first shiver!"

"A jacket would be quite an excitement, wouldn't it? And I believe it would be a new experience to catch cold. Do you notice that no one catches cold here? We go down with influenza, and chills, and fever, and horrid things like that, but sneezing is a lost art!"

"You have been out nine months, haven't you, Chum, and you are beginning to feel it? You did not take that view on your arrival, did you? At first sight the Station strikes you as a merry little place, where we all wear white clothes and pretend that we like each other."

"And by-and-by we realise the coal-dust," said Mrs. Lewin, with veiled bitterness. "You are quite right—one easily gets to feel soiled in Port Victoria!"

"I think when the rains come the wet heat oozes

into one's bones somehow. You will have to go up to Victoria if you feel limp."

"We ought to make up a party," said Captain Gilderoy. "Mrs. Clayton would join with pleasure, I am sure, and Miss Denver. They had great games there last year—some of the men from 'By-Jovey' got leave and went too. Have you had your mail yet? We can sit here in comfort while Wray goes and gets them for us, if you like."

"Thanks. Don't bring my husband's, though, please, Captain Gilderoy. He likes to fetch his mail himself."

The post-office was close to the wharf, behind a block of store-houses, where the big firms received their imports and placed them for unpacking. Captain Gilderoy disappeared behind a wall of coal, and Mrs. Gilderoy and Mrs. Lewin sat still on their ponies in the shade, now chatting to some acquaintance who had joined them, now watching the cargo being dumped down into the grit and dirt of the quay.

"We can go on board as soon as that mess is cleared off!" said Mrs. Gilderoy, with a nod towards the bales that would feed her during the next month. "But it is so uncomfortable while they are all running about and falling over each other round the hatches. Mrs. Ritchie Stern is on board. Her husband's boat is coming in to-day to coal, she says, and she followed him in the mail. They will be here for some days. Captain Nugent is bursting with excitement, and planning a ball for every night that they spend here!"

"Heaven help them!" said Chum, laughing. "What is Captain Stern's boat?"

"The *Greville*, I think." She dropped her voice a note lower, and leaned over her saddle. "Have

you heard that there is trouble on the East Coast, up at Port Cecil?"

"No!" Something in the tone startled Chum, though the words meant nothing to her. "Port Cecil!" she repeated vaguely. "Is that——"

"No, not in Key Island at all—on the African coast, in British East Africa, and dangerously near the German frontier. I believe it never has been rightly settled as to whether Port Cecil is British or German territory. I wish they had handed it over with Mafia. It would be so much more sensible! There is nothing officially stated, but a rumour of trouble has leaked out. The Capetown authorities have cabled through to our man to send some one up at once. You see, it is so much nearer than it would be for them, and it's a very delicate kind of mission. Wray calls it handling a merekat with boxing-gloves on! We can't offend the natives, and we won't offend Germany for some reason just now. It's to be all tact and no soldiers this time."

"Then Mr. Halton is the right man to go."

"Undoubtedly; and as Gregory has his own little threatened rows to amuse him, I suppose they think at Capetown that it's safe to let him use his own discretion as to who he sends. Otherwise I should be afraid of his going himself and setting the country in a blaze, if I were the man above him."

"I don't think he would do that while the natives here seem still so unsettled. But what a disappointment for Mr. Halton! He told me he was longing to get home."

"Oh, my dear, it's awful! The town is not only the Naboth's vineyard of our coast and Germany's, but it is unhealthy. They say the white soldiers can hardly live there. Do you know that Wray thinks they will send up the 28th from Natal?"

"Ally's regiment! But I thought there was to be no fighting?"

"No; but they must have soldiers in case of accidents, and they want to treat Port Cecil as separate from the rest of the Protectorate. It was not included in the treaty of 1895, or some such bungle, and so there is always being a row about it. Wray tried to explain it to me, but I never *can* understand. Anyhow, it is a diplomatic mission, and enough to turn Mr. Halton's hair grey, unless he knows something about the place. Has he ever been in that part?"

"I don't think so; but Mr. Gregory spoke one day of a friend of his—a man he seems to think very able—who has been consul, or something of that sort, there for years. I wonder that the Government did not leave him to settle matters."

"My dear Chum, don't you know that our Government never does use the man on the spot who has gained experience and really could manage? The instant there is trouble they send some one who has never heard of the place, and is bound to blunder at first, and they 'commission him to inquire,' etc. We are mad on commissions. It's a national disease. I think sometimes that it's a farce we play to gain them."

"Here comes Captain Gilderoy," said Mrs. Lewin absently. She was wondering if this new billet would keep Halton longer in Key Island, for she felt that the sooner he went the safer she should be. Yet he was emphatically the only man at hand whom Gregory had to send to Port Cecil, for Arthur White was no diplomatist, and Major Churton's position so strictly military as to make his presence a menace. Captain Gilderoy handed her two letters—one from her home, far off in the hunting county of Leicestershire, and one in the hand-writ-

ing of an old school friend, who had since married a man high in authority, and had a dangerous desire to dabble in state-craft. She knew of appointments and the pulling of strings before the *Gazette* had ratified them, and her wisdom was a thing that even her husband sometimes feared. It chanced that Leoline Lewin opened this letter before her father's, read the first few sentences, which were merely a heading, and suddenly became immersed, to the exclusion even of the smell of fissikh and the ever-recurring faces around her.

"But my real news," wrote Chum's school-mate, "refers to you, or, I hope, will do so if you have only gained the good-will of your Administrator. Cyril Ernest has come into the Rignold title, and that means resigning his commission and going into Parliament—he was always a politician rather than a soldier. He was A.D.C. to old Sir Geoffrey Vaughan, who is a great crony of mine. I met the old fellow at Victoria House the other night, and buttonholed him in a corner. Don't tell me I am not a good friend, Chum, for I thought of you at once, and tried to impress Ally's virtues on him. He hummed and hawed a little, but he remembered Ally; he said there were two nice boys to whom he gave the preference—your husband and Brissy Nugent, who, I think, was at Sandhurst with him. I am afraid I belittled Brissy in your interest. It is so unfortunate that they are stationed at the same place, for I could gain no absolute promise from Sir Geoffrey. All he would say was that he would leave it to Evelyn Gregory to give the casting vote, and he has written to him unofficially. Weaker men are fond of leaving the decision with Gregory. Now, my dear girl, it all depends on you. You *must* manage your man in office so that he shall recommend Ally, and not Captain Nugent. It is a

settled thing that Sir Geoffrey will go to Malta, unless he has something even better—a home command, it might be. Don't believe any one who talks about the African generals; I know better. Even my husband is not in my confidence about the appointment yet, but you may take my word for it, and I am telling you because it gives you a start over Mrs. Nugent—I never did like that woman—and you are on the spot, too, and she is not. I have only just time to catch the mail," etc.

Mrs. Lewin turned the pages breathlessly, and the lines danced before her eyes. Here were two appointments confidentially placed in the hands of the man Government hardly professed to trust; but she was not thinking of the unofficial way in which the Empire was really worked, or the incalculable value of the force which is politely termed "Influence." Her personal stake in the matter drove even the question of the trouble in East Africa out of her head, though before her friend's letter she was keenly interested in it as in some sort concerning Gregory. She saw only that here was the escape for which she had prayed, and the old French saying, that "What a woman wishes, God wishes," recurred to her mind like a blessing. Malta or England—the words spelt rescue, however one read them. Her eyes followed every line of the great quiescent liner hungrily, while, in her fevered fancy, she saw it carrying her out of danger—her and Ally together—beyond the rat-trap where the rats were already beginning to menace each other because they could not get out.

Surely Ally's appointment must be a foregone conclusion! She had already done what her friend counselled, in her forethought for the future, and had gained the ear of the Administrator. In their increasing confidence she had spoken frankly though

delicately of her husband, and had acknowledged that she was ambitious for him, and wished him to rise. And Gregory had sympathised, even though he might not believe in Ally's capabilities. Surely he would help her!

She did not trouble over Brissy much as a rival, for Evelyn Gregory thought no more of him than of his A.D.C. Brissy was not the stumbling-block in the way of success—it was unfortunately Ally himself who was his own enemy. But forewarned is forearmed, and she must this time force him to a strategic management of his chief for both their sakes. Her very muscles felt tense and braced for the effort, as she sat in the shade of the coal walls, mechanically nodding and smiling at the people round her. As soon as might be she would get out of all this, and ride home and wait for Ally. They must talk it over, and arrange the campaign the instant they could do so without arousing suspicion. She wondered if her own precious news had "leaked out" as well as the African appointment; but it was unlikely. The woman who had told her prided herself on knowing such secrets long before they were even private property.

On the further side of the wharf Brissy Nugent himself was reading stale news from an old paper with the avidity of a starved dog, while he also waited to go on board the mail boat; but the Naval and Military intelligence told him nothing of his own possible fortune, and in fact he never dreamed of gaining any advantage from the paper beyond a passing amusement. He was sitting on a pile of logwood waiting for shipment in a sailing vessel, with a Madras helmet spread like an umbrella over his head and shoulders, side by side with Clayton of the A.S.C.

"I see that Bobs was talking to the Sandhurst

Cadets the other day," said Clayton, turning his own paper, posted from England a month since, "and he said it was all nonsense to suppose that no man can get on in the Army without influence. My firm conviction is that without influence in the Army one might as well make up one's mind to achieve nothing but the ordinary promotion which comes with time."

"Oh, the system which should be adopted is to do away with rewards altogether," said Nugent simply. "Either a man does his duty, or he does not. If he does, well and good. If he doesn't, then he ought to be kicked out." His soulless eyes went out over the paper he was holding in search of his acquaintance, and he saluted Miss Denver, who was passing on her pony, with a flash of white teeth under his black moustache. He was more interested in her at the moment than in what he was saying, albeit it was his honest conviction.

"That's a beautifully simple creed, Brissy, and I have no doubt that if it were adopted there would be fewer of the absolutely useless men who encumber the Service. They do nothing either one way or the other; they usually have money, are in no way dependent on their profession, and care nothing for it, except in so far as it affords them amusement. There's a case not five miles from here!" he added significantly.

"You mean old Ally Sloper. Yes, I don't suppose he'll ever do much. But, then, he don't need to."

"Exactly!" said Clayton with frank bitterness. "And because he hasn't got it in him to push himself, a beneficent Providence has given him friends in office, and a wife with brains and ambition. That woman means him to get on, Brissy, and she could make something even of you or me."

"I saw her here a moment ago," said Brissy, to whom abstract references always suggested actual things. "She was on Liscarton, by the coal heap over there. She seems to have gone now!"

Mrs. Lewin's place was indeed empty, but he did not know in what relation that affected him. For Chum had gone home, and when Captain Lewin appeared among the chattering crowd on the wharf, he learned from the Gilderoys that she had left a message for him to the effect that heat and coal-dust threatened to transform her to a nigger, but he would find her cleaned and awaiting him at luncheon time. Ally, jocund and social, moved among his friends, as pleased to be off work as a school-boy out of school.

"Chum's off colour a bit, I think," he said confidentially to Diana Churton. "She couldn't sleep last night for the heat."

"We'll get out to Vohitra—it's about time," said Di good-naturedly. "I'm thinking of making up a party. You can't get back to lunch at the bungalow, Ally; it's too late. Come on board the mail, and see Mrs. Ritchie Stern. The *Greville* has just passed the Gates."

Ally vacillated, and looked at his watch. "Chum expected me to lunch at home!" he said.

"Send Brissy in your place!" said Di, with a short laugh. "No, tell Bute; he's got to ride up to Government House, and he'll take a message."

"I'll tell you what," said Ally, and his face cleared to its own gay good-humour, "I'll telephone; I can ring up from the post-office. Wait for me, Di, and we'll go on board together."

CHAPTER XI

"Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? There is more hope of a fool than of him!"—*Jewish Proverb.*

I THINK it is the Chinese who have a proverb that says: "To expect one who does not come, to eat and not to be satisfied, and to work for years and get no promotion, are three things which are enough to kill a man." Mrs. Lewin had been proving the wearing process of the first clause for a good half-hour, before the telephone bell rang, and her husband's voice informed her that he was detained, and —er—awfully sorry, but would not be in to lunch. "I'll come up later—have you got a headache, Chum?" said the strong tones, muffled to half their weight like a ventriloquist's.

The "er" was a fatal hesitation, and struck Mrs. Lewin's keenness of perception. Ally had not been detained by duty as he wished her to imagine—he was lunching on board the mail boat, catching at the nearest pleasure as usual, to his own detriment and hers. For a minute a wave of very human irritation prompted her to let him go his own way. Why should she for ever stand between him and retribution? She was tired, and inclination prompted her to let the struggle go, and take consequences as easily and without regret as he did. Then with another change of mood she saw that Ally's lack of purpose was no excuse for her own. The very things she saw and condemned in him were a spur to her to be on her own guard. The danger was hers as well as his—the object to be

gained her own safety too. She could let no chance go by, and the feeblest of human excuses always is, "I am no worse than my neighbours." It all passed over her conscious mind while she stood with the little apparatus still in her hands.

"No, I've no headache—I'm all right," she said quietly. "But come up after lunch, Ally—I want to see you. It's important—but don't say anything to any one. Tell them I am seedy if you like, and that you must get back."

She wondered as she heard his half-uneasy "Yes, of course I'll come the minute I can," if there were any one standing near him. One could hear too much in a public place, if one were only near the instrument. Well, it could not be helped, and after all they might think it was a private matter—something contained in her own home mail. But in Key Island every one's business is of importance to discuss for lack of one's own, and even her own guarded sentences would have grown to a state secret before nightfall, had they been overhead.

Ally was so relieved to be easily excused that he really did as he had promised, and rode up before three o'clock, feeling a virtuous husband and deserving of much welcome and something to drink, for he was really very hot. He brought many invitations to consider themselves engaged for the next two days, beginning with a dance that night at the Wessex Mess, and including a breakfast party and two luncheons, for the mail boat and the *Greville* were both busy in friendly rivalry. The projected gaiety was driven out of his head, however, by his wife's private news, and he was so really engrossed with the possibility of their removal, that Chum forgave him his defection from lunch, and came over and sat on the arm of his chair, while he read her friend's letter.

"Great Scot, what luck!" he said with boyish excitement. "Chum, we must manage it, if you have to go on your knees to Gregory's Powder, and I to lick old Sir Geoffrey's boots! Malta or a home station—thank Heaven the old boy always liked me!"

"Did he like Brissy as well?" said Leoline anxiously, and without any enmity towards Brissy, feeling glad of his shortcomings. "Ally, he *can't* have thought Brissy as nice as you!"

"Poor old Bristles! No, I do think I showed up rather well against him, you know, Chum. Anyhow it seems to rest with Gregory. What a good stroke that was of yours to play up to him, old girl! You always said he was a good man to have behind you—I think you're the smartest Chum a fellow ever married! No, you don't like that word, do you—I mean you're the quickest, and the most farseeing ——"

He broke off to laugh and put his arm round her as she leaned over his shoulder, giving her a boyish hug that seemed to take her breath away, for she freed herself of him with a protest like a cry.

"Don't, Ally!—let me get up—I can't breathe!—No, it's nothing. Yes, of course we must have the appointment—it's all in your hands now."

"Mine! It's much better in yours ——"

"No!—no!—you must make a good impression, somehow. I am sure the Administrator likes you for yourself—every one does. It's only that you will shirk, that annoys him. Don't play tennis or polo quite so much—try and seem to have grasped the situation here—I'll coach you. We must get away—oh, we must have that appointment!"

She spoke breathlessly, but he was excited also, and seemed to catch more fire from her. His face

only fell once as he thought of the *Greville* and mail boat festivities.

"By Jove! and this was to be a week, too! Never mind—I'll give up most of it and stick to business. You're quite right, Chum—I'll be seized with a savage desire to get things properly settled up before Halton goes. I would grub in correspondence and red tape if only it would ensure my getting out of this beastly island!"

"Don't overdo it," said Mrs. Lewin nervously. "He is so quick to see through people. Ally, I wonder if he will send Mr. Halton to Port Cecil? I suppose you've heard of that—isn't it strange that Mr. Gregory should have the nomination of both men to these appointments!"

"Oh I don't care if the whole of East Africa is put into Halton's hands, so long as I get the other show. Think of it, Chum—home leave, food that isn't tinned, lots going on, and some sport again! *Salama* for old Sir Geoffrey!"

He caught her round the waist, to the amazement of Abdallah, who was bringing in the tea, and waltzed her round the room, steering through the scattered chairs and tables and even into the next room with a dexterity that made her laugh until she could not keep pace with him, and dropped on to the sofa leaving Ally to finish with a grand *pas seul* that landed him with a thud against the butler's portly person. Chum sat on the sofa, wiping her eyes rather hysterically, while Ally and Abdallah sorted themselves; and then they drank their tea with a special allowance of sugar in it for the honour of the occasion.

"When we get to Malta," said Chum seriously, "we will have cream too, as well as milk—can you get cream in Malta, Ally?—and it shall be real tea, up from India, not this nasty stuff from Natal."

In the background of her mind she was always conscious of a sense of reluctance, a desire that did not accord with her earnest assertions of delight in leaving Key Island. Some deep root in her very nature seemed dragging her back whenever she spoke of her departure, and the more she felt it the more she repeated the idea as if to get used to it. It was a thing she had to fight, and she faced it desperately in this its very beginning.

It haunted her through the dance that night, and the whirl of flying feet round the long mess-room. It was too hot for dancing, but Mrs. Lewin did not seem to feel the heat; she was indefatigable, and waltzed through the programme, looking as cool and dry at the end of the evening as at the beginning which is a great feat for a Maitso dance. Leoline wondered if this were the last time she should sit out on the steps of the Mess, or keep time to the Gunners' band,—and thrust the thought away. It was an ever recurring ghost, that "last time," and stung most keenly, strange to say, through an introduction to the guests of the evening, Captain and Mrs. Ritchie Stern. Blanche Stern had very large and searching eyes of a blue that mocked the sea—wholesome eyes, that seemed never to have reflected the image of any man save her husband, and indeed the only thing that Mrs. Gilderoy could find to say of her was that she posed as being in love with Ritchie Stern to fatiguing extent. In an assembly of auctioned men and assorted wives, she was perhaps rather unlikely; but as their eyes met, Mrs. Lewin put her hand to the diamond pendant at her throat with a little start, and a choking feeling that Mrs. Stern was divining her secret mind. They had been introduced in a pause between the dances, and were leaning over the wooden railing of the stoep side by side, while their respective partners fought

for ices on their behalf. No African stoep should have a railing of course, but Key Island has improved upon its model in its own opinion, and has gone further and twined the woodwork with stephanotis and gardenia. The strong hothouse scents were in Mrs. Ritchie's nostrils as she leaned out into the night, looking down on the lights of Port Victoria.

"Captain Stern was here for a fortnight once," she said idly; "I often thought we should like it as a station—it is such an idyllic place. How lovely these flowers are!"

"It is horrible!" said Mrs. Lewin, with sudden energy. "It is like a trap—you cannot get out, and there is nothing to do. You would hate it!" She was unconscious that she repeated every one else's *Miserere* for the first time.

"I don't think I should mind, if my husband were here too," said Blanche frankly. She turned her eyes on Mrs. Lewin as if she saw something that interested her in the restless beautiful figure. "The worst of marrying a Navy man is that one is not sufficiently considered in his appointments! They *will* send Ritchie to dubious corners of the earth, just when the children have arranged to have the measles, and I can't be in two places at once."

Mrs. Lewin looked across the stoep to the open doorway where Captain Stern presented a good flat back to her view as he talked to Major Churton. She looked with unconscious wistfulness at his shaven fair head and tanned neck, and wondered if under the circumstances she would have felt her heart torn in two because the seas divided them? And then she remembered her ghost of reluctance to leave this place that she said she hated, and Mrs. Stern's next words were full of horror to her.

"It is so short-sighted of women to stake their little all on a man who is not safe to be no farther off than the next room! I know I shall loath this harbour when I see the *Greville* slipping out of it and over the horizon with a peace-maker for East Africa—you know that that is what she is here for, of course, or is it still an official and consequently an open secret?"

"We have heard something of it. Does Captain Stern expect to be here long?"

"He will leave the instant your Administrator produces the man he has come to fetch. I don't really know who I dislike the most just now—the Capetown people, who hurried him away on this business, or the Port Cecil people, who are making the trouble, or the man he is taking to the scene of action."

"Will he stop there?"

"I am afraid so, for goodness knows how long! Until the affair is settled one way or another, I expect. Ritchie hopes he will get a chance to shell the town, of course—you can imagine my feelings! I do hope you are sending a nice, timid man from Key'land, who prefers diplomacy to shells!"

"I can't say who it will be, but it is almost certain to be Mr. Halton, and he is a thorough diplomatist. The whole thing is to be rather hushed up, isn't it?"

"Yes, and as peacefully arranged as possible, I believe. That is my great comfort!" Mrs. Stern laughed a little whimsically at herself. "The two things the Government is aiming at are speed and secrecy—not that there is much secrecy about it amongst us, of course. But they seem bent on prompt action for once, and I believe they want to get it all settled quietly before the public at home recognise that anything *more* is taking place in

Africa! That is why they are forwarding a man from Key'land instead of from home or direct from the Government out here. It is like going up the back stairs to avoid comment! Well, it is about time that Africa dropped into the background, isn't it? We were at Beira when Ritchie got his orders, and as the mail was there I came on first. They seem to have cabled in all directions from Capetown —to us, and to your Administrator, and to the regiment at Durban."

"That is my husband's regiment," remarked Chum, as she took the ice from her triumphant partner at last. "I suppose it was quicker to transport them by sea than across land."

Later on it chanced that she danced with Ritchie Stern, and caught herself analysing him with feverish intensity as a man loved by, and in love with, his own wife. Captain Stern was not a comforting study, because there were no excuses in him for one's own failings. He was so simply a gentleman as to make more questionable characters seem shady by contrast, when without it they had been merely complex. It was like plunging one's hand into cold, still water of an infinite depth, to try and plump his character, and his habit of speaking from the bottom of his lungs rather than the top of his throat intensified the impression. It was a matter of training, but it seemed an outcome of his personality. He struck Leoline Lewin as very kind, which depressed her still more—she did not know why—and he stood out in her mind as the one man she had danced with who had not looked or spoken her a compliment.

"I like the Sterns very much, Ally," she said as they rode home in the faint coolness of the hour before dawn—a mere promise of coolness, that was never fulfilled by the day. "But they give me the

feeling of having been to church—do Navy people ever strike you like that?"

"No," said Ally, who had other impressions of ward-rooms, "very much the other way."

"Oh, I don't mean that," said Chum vaguely. "Only I feel that I have been listening to a sermon in the open air—and I have grown so unused to the open air that I am afraid of catching a moral cold. Ally, how dreadfully confined we grow in garrisons! Mrs. Stern brings the sea winds to you in her eyes."

"You are not growing poetical, are you, Chum?" said Ally suspiciously. "I thought Stern a very decent chap—can't imagine him preaching."

"He couldn't!" said Chum, dropping to the old level of his thought, and abandoning her own. "But I preached myself the sermon on him as the text, and it was, 'Woe unto them who can see their own wives, for they shall not see any one else's!' What lovely emeralds Mrs. Stern was wearing, by the way."

"Yes, I wish I could give you some more stones. I'll try, if we get to Malta."

"I would rather have nice clothes than jewels," said Chum. "A dowdy woman with diamonds is worse dressed than a *chic* one with paste, all the world over. And we can't run to both—even at Malta."

"Did you like Mrs. Stern?"

"Yes!" said Chum, her eyes darkening to the shadows on purple velvet. "And I hope I shall not meet her again."

She said the last words savagely, under her breath. They were her echo to Mrs. Stern's, that still hurt her, and made her afraid of the eyes that divined her secret mind.

"It is so short-sighted of women to stake their

little all on a man who is not safe to be no farther off than the next room!"

She began to feel that she could hardly wait for Ally's appointment to be a certainty; if the Administrator did not inform him of his good fortune soon, the strain on their nerves would make them both ill-tempered, and that was a vulgarity not to be contemplated. Alaric and she had always been as courteous to each other as two acquaintances; it was one of her theories of married life, and not yet overthrown by experience. The indefiniteness of his own escape affected Ally too, so that they were both unusually restless, and it was a relief next morning when breakfast was over and he could go up to Government House.

"Don't be late for luncheon, Ally!" Chum said, following him on to the stoep, where he paused to light his cigarette, a white figure against the green of the garden. "It will be so awful waiting!"

"Perhaps I shan't have any news," said Alaric in gloomy anticipation.

"He must speak of it to-day!"

"It would be just like him not to. He will be so immersed in the East African business, he will forget all about our little affairs."

A momentary doubt dawned in Mrs. Lewin's eyes. She thought of the Gilderoys' picnic, and that large heavy hand on her own. Was she indeed a slight incident in his mind, to be brushed aside by larger interests? She had never set eyes on Gregory since that moment, and the new sweet fear of him that had overwhelmed her was in abeyance for the present. Perhaps Ally was right, and they were only details in this man's career, a mere speck on his ambition. She tried for nothing but honest relief as she turned back to the house.

"Well come and tell me anyway," she said over her shoulder. "I *must* know!"

"All right," he replied, more soberly than usual. "I will come back the second he will let me—I really will! It's no joking matter to either of us."

The morning was growing too hot to be out of doors as he walked off through the rose-bushes, and out of the gate into the grounds of Government House. Mrs. Lewin stood in the doorway until the white helmet flitted out of sight among the thickening trees, and then went in to write letters. The writing-table stood close to one of the seven windows, and she slid up the shutter and fastened the pin so that the draught should fan her comfortably, before she began her correspondence. Outside a wild hot wind was rushing over the hillside, and the smell of innumerable flowers dripped in on its breath. She wrote slowly, and the sentences would not come. All her brain seemed to have followed Ally, and to be waiting with him for the Administrator to speak.

At the hour of the Miroro she went into her room and lay down under the mosquito curtains with a fan in her hand. Usually she fanned herself to sleep, but to-day sleep would not come any more than the flow of words. For half-an-hour she lay in the hot, still room, counting the silver things on the dressing-table, and the photographs on the wall, and noticing without her will that the black girl who attended to her room, had not hung her gowns aright. Natives were so tiresome; it would be almost better to experiment with an Arab.

Would the time never go? Was Ally never coming?

She rose before lunch could possibly be ready, and dressed herself. Then she wandered into the

central room that served for drawing-room and lounge, and from which the others all opened out. She found Ally's cigarettes on a table and smoked one, turning over the pages of last month's magazines, which had just come in by the mail. The smudgy illustrations annoyed her, and she flung them by and rose restlessly, wandering about the hot, sweet rooms, and listening for his step through the glare outside.

Still he did not come. It was past the luncheon hour now, and Abdallah had put the finishing touches to the table and stood by in grave reproach, his snowy turban already on, and his hands folded over his tunic. Abdallah was always severely white at luncheon, his costume consisting merely of a tunic and turban; but by dinner time he had added a coloured bandana and an embroidered jacket. His motionless presence added the last irritation to her overwrought mood, and she sent him away until Captain Lewin should appear.

The hours dragged away, until the morning had slipped into afternoon. Still he did not come. With a feeling that she wanted to shriek hysterically, Leoline paced steadily up and down the broad floors of the bungalow, from one shaded room into another, and so back to the corner where the table was still spread. She could not eat, and she felt that Ally might come at any moment. Something was keeping him—not his own pleasure this time; his being transferred from Key Island was a weighty matter even to him, and she knew he would return to her for advice and support as soon as he could. He could see his own interest sufficiently in this to resist a passing temptation, but there was none to keep him at Government House. The horrible part was that it might be nothing but trivial duties that detained him after all, and they might have to go

through this suspense again. The heat seemed to get no less as the day wore towards four o'clock, and her limbs began to feel lifeless and heavy, as if paralysed. When at last the door opened and he walked quietly in, she did not rise to meet him or spring up for a minute. She sat there watching him come straight towards her with a curious speculative feeling that there was a grave importance in his manner that seemed a little ridiculous. She criticised him as if he were somebody not belonging to her.

"Well!" she said rising at last, in a slow mechanical fashion. She looked at him all across the room. Yes, certainly he was so grave as to be unlike himself—not depressed, but self-sufficient, almost pompous. It was so foreign to any mood in which she had seen Alaric before that she could only stare at him.

He sat down heavily in a basket chair that creaked beneath his weight, and so added to her absurd impression that he was assuming the air of an elderly and important personage. He did not speak either at once, and when he did he seemed to be weighing his words, as if he said a solemn thing.

"I have got it!"

"The appointment?" she said with a long breath, trying to shake off her own leadenness and the effect of his strange manner. "Oh, Ally, what good news! I have been so frightened—when you did not come, you know,—I thought we might still have to wait."

"He spoke of it almost at once. We have talked of little else. He was giving me minute instructions."

A blank feeling of non-comprehension seemed to take possession of her. He was still unlike himself, or else Gregory's earnestness had impressed him at

last. Perhaps the force of the stronger man had been let loose on the weaker for once, for the sake of urging him to a more serious sense of his position. She knew that Gregory had been impatient of his indifference in his present post; perhaps he had told him plainly that he must be more conscientious with Sir Geoffrey Vaughan.

"Instructions!" she repeated slowly. "For Malta?"

"No—not that. I am going to East Africa."

She did not cry out, but she fell back a step as if some unknown hand had struck her a heavy blow. Her eyes were absolutely frightened, and she spoke in a low voice of intense terror.

"But Ally—you can't! You daren't accept it—you can't do it!"

He fired at the last words as if he half expected them. "Why not?" he said irritably. "Why can't I do it? I must accept it—you must see that! I have accepted it already. It is arranged."

"You can't do it!" she repeated bluntly. "It is a heavy responsibility to give to any man—any experienced man even. Why isn't Mr. Halton going?"

"He can't be spared; there is an awful row going on already over the crops."

"The hemp!" she said breathlessly, her memory going back to those words of Gregory's—"They have given me *carte blanche* to do as I think best"—"They are not burning the crops?"

"Yes they are. The order went out yesterday. There is a compensation of course, but the Chinese are furious, and that gives them away, for they must have been making their fortunes out of the hashish. Halton must stay and see Gregory through it—he has no one to send but me."

In a streak of terror through her quickened brain

it seemed as if she saw all the disaster of the choice. She had never finally acknowledged to herself that Ally depended on her for the least success in his life, but in the stress of the moment she knew that with her to guide and counsel and manage he might come through this ordeal—not creditably, but without failure. Without her it was like sending a child to play with a train of gunpowder. Some horrible intuition seemed to tell her his incapacity, and excuse the belief in herself. Ally in a position that needed absolute diplomacy! Ally managing a delicate enquiry that might lead to a serious issue! She realised only in her dismay that she could not go with him to East Africa to save him from failure —the loss of her own escape from secret peril did not really trouble her mind at the time. The fear for him drove her to repeating blankly, "You can't do it—you mustn't!"

"Good God, Chum!" he exclaimed in a sudden squall of irritation, "you are ridiculous! What do you mean? You are always worrying me over getting on, and having a career, and now that I have got an opening, you seem to want me to back out! Don't you see that I can't? Gregory isn't the man to give me a second chance. He is offering me a tremendous lift in putting me in such a position."

Only one sentence in his angry speech found room for itself in her mind, for she saw that it was true. He could not back out. Evelyn Gregory had him fast in his iron grip, and if he chose to send him to his ruin he was helpless. She laid her hand on the back of a chair and held it cruelly tight as if to help herself to think. Why had he done this? Why? She kept asking herself the question again and again, and found no answer. It was so plausible on the face of it, this threatened rising over the

hemp crops, and Halton's presence as an immediate necessity, that she felt that it was not true. To the outside world the appointment of an emissary sent to Port Cecil to "enquire" might come within Alaric's sphere, particularly under the stress of circumstances in Key Island, but not to her. She had a giant fear of Gregory born of her greater knowledge of him that no one in the Island could share. As she stood there looking with unseeing eyes at Alaric's handsome, annoyed face, she saw only the shadowy strength of the man whom she had learned to know—unscrupulous, tyrannical, successful because he allowed nothing to stand in his way. Now that she and hers were to be swept aside after his method, she began to realise for the first time the atmosphere of terror that had seemed to hang round him in the minds of those who first spoke of him to her. Hitherto she had been but a spectator, and he had interested her as a danger of which one only reads. To find oneself threatened by the same thing in reality makes the difference.

"Well!" said Alaric at last, with the half-offended air of a spoilt child, "I'm sorry you are not better pleased, Chum! I thought you would be as proud as I felt when he told me. Of course I'm sorry to leave you behind, old girl, but perhaps we shall get something good out of this later." He spoke half apologetically, but the old easy optimism was coming back to him. Fortune had always given Alaric what he wanted; he took her gifts for granted.

"Who will have Malta? Brissy?" said his wife quietly.

"Yes, he's off next mail—not by this. Of course he'll have to be officially appointed; but Gregory has answered Sir Geoffrey's letter privately, as he was asked. I shall have to go to-morrow, or next

day at latest, Chum. I'm sorry!" he added simply, as a tribute to parting with her.

But she felt suddenly that he was glad to go—glad even of this chance of action. He did not mind leaving her behind if only he were free of the monotony of Key Island, which also held more uncomfortable memories for him than his wife guessed. Things were getting complicated round Ally, and what had been a pleasant indulgence and flattering to his vanity, was growing to be a tie exacted from him by a jealous woman. He could not have told, if he had honestly tried to do so, how he had drifted so far with Diana Churton; such men as Alaric Lewin are as incapable of accounting for the crisis of their lives as they are of managing them. He trusted to fortune again. Events had generally shaped themselves comfortably for him; and, as in the present case, when there was a tight corner the natural march of circumstances had forced him out of it without any responsibility on his part.

Circumstances were marching him out now, and he was really glad. Captain Stern and the *Greville* would carry him safely away from Key Island to-morrow, and Diana's last note which he had found at the club would go unanswered through no fault of his. He couldn't go to Maitso to-night, it was out of the question. For the look of the thing he must spend what might be his last evening with Chum—and of course he wanted to, he added mentally to the back of her head, as she bent over his portmanteau. His Malagasan man was busy over the shirt-case, and he himself ramming the surplus of his property into the kit-bag, but Chum had become her old self again, and risen to the occasion of his packing, once the stupefaction of his news had passed off. He was sure it was only the surprise which had made her unlike herself; she was

getting on more with the portmanteau, in spite of the heat, than either Longa or himself with their share.

"Ally," said Mrs. Lewin quietly, as she tucked a pair of socks into an empty corner, "will you go over to the Churtons to-night to say good-bye?"

"N—no!" He stammered a little, in the discomfort of his own knowledge. "It's my last evening most likely, Chum!—at least we may go to-morrow."

"Yes, of course. (Mind the gun-case, Longa!) I didn't mean you to be out all the time. But I think you might ride over and just say good-bye—you would be back in an hour. They will be so awfully hurt if you don't."

"Yes," said Ally uneasily. A sensible and considerate wife is a very useful article so long as her husband wishes to make use of these two qualities; when he does not, he would prefer her to be more unreasonable.

Chum's suggestion was awkward, because he was afraid to refuse to go to Maitso lest she should be surprised. . . . Hang it! the whole thing had become a nuisance. How glad he was he should be out of it to-morrow! Then a brilliant idea struck him. He would go down to the club and be detained. He could write Di a note, too, from there, and ask her to come down and see him off if possible. He did not know when they would leave, so it was most probable that she would miss him—he did not mind that either. Anyhow, there would be plenty of fellows at the club to make an excuse for getting no further. He might see Churton too. He liked Churton—when he didn't feel a grovelling cad.

"All right, perhaps I'd better. I can go after dinner, but I shan't be long," he said. Mrs. Lewin

did not answer or look at him. She was very busy over the portmanteau.

It was rather a silent dinner, but he noticed with real pain and affection how soft and fair Leoline looked in her long white dinner-gown, and wondered when they would have one of their merry *tête-à-tête* meals again. He was devoted to his wife—in theory at any rate. Perhaps Chum could not have pleaded much more, save that she tried to practise what she preached. If men were not such complex animals the Day of Judgment would be a simpler ceremony, but as things are they will have many pleas to enter of former good conduct and extenuating circumstances. Ally rode away with his heart full of his wife, because she had entered there through his eyes, and with no thought of infidelity to her. At the club he sat down and wrote a note, which was the more emphatic because he did not mean it, and a little more reckless in expression than usual because he was going away in safety.

He could not find his own sais, who should have followed him into town to look after his pony, and risked sending a loafer whom he knew by sight, to Maitso. The man grinned and put the letter in his breast before he hitched up his trousers to show his zeal, the action meaning that Captain Lewin was to understand he would run all the way.

Ally laughed good-naturedly. "Mind it's important. Give it to Mrs. Churton herself," he said. "I'll pay you when you come back without it."

"Yes, Baas! I give it dere!" said the nigger, and he started off at a jog-trot along the twinkling street towards the dusk of Maitso Hill.

Ally turned back into the club, still laughing.

CHAPTER XII

"'Lachye noogh?' as Botha said to his slave."—*Boer Proverb.*

"It is a little unfortunate all round," said the Commissioner. "Or perhaps inconvenient is the better word."

"As far as it affects you, you are better off than if you were going to Port Cecil. This may not be anything—we may cool down and tide over, and you will catch this mail. She does not leave until Thursday."

The Administrator was sitting at his own writing-table, with his back to Halton, who had also been at work, as the scattered papers testified. The room was one of many in Government House that had no especial use, and had been given up to the work of the enquiry. The third chair and littered writing-table was at the moment unoccupied, and belonged to Captain Lewin. Over Halton's head ranged a portly array of shelves on which the old papers and accounts of the British African Island Co., Ltd., were dustily stored, and attracted the mosquitoes, as well as a water-tank, for though he cannot breed in them the mosquito loves a book-shelf that is not often disturbed, and creeps along the volumes' edges and hides behind their bulk.

"Hardly!" said the Commissioner, with a slight shrug. "She has nearly finished discharging her cargo already, and will not take two days to coal." He reached up over his head, and took down one of the dusty volumes a little curiously, as if he had not observed it before. There were some books of

reference among the old ledgers, and this, to judge from its appearance, was one, rather than an account book.

"You will get the next boat, then," said Gregory, off-handedly. His back being towards his coadjutator as he thus dismissed the subject of his convenience, he did not see Halton's eyes as he slowly raised them from the old book and looked at him. It seemed he had found the passage he wanted, for he kept his finger on a yellowed leaf while he spoke.

"I see of course the expediency of remaining here at the moment, as you have decided on the necessity of such a stringent measure as burning the hemp-crop." His voice was formal, and so perfectly controlled that it contained neither anger nor disapprobation nor argument. The Administrator's busy pen stopped. He lifted his head slightly as though listening, and came within the radius of the shaded electric light. But the shorn reddish hair betrayed nothing unless it were the fact that he was growing very grey towards the temples. His overhanging brow and secretive mouth were not visible to the Commissioner, whose level voice ran on quietly.

"Before closing this matter, however, I should like for principle's sake to enter a protest, though it is merely a matter of form. I do not consider Captain Lewin a fit man to send to East Africa on this business. I believe him to be absolutely incapable of the anxious work before him, and if he does not make a hash of the whole business it will be a miracle. The power of course lies in your hands; the decision is with you. I am not here to advise you in this, but, unofficially, I should be doing an unfriendly thing if I did not warn you of my opinion as to his incompetence."

For a minute there was silence, while the last words hung in the air like a menace. They meant more than the private counsel of one man to another—they might also be translated as warning Gregory that his ally's opinion of Lewin's incapacity would find voice in high places. It was perhaps a gauge thrown down, and if so it was taken up very quietly in the next few words, that the Administrator uttered as naturally as if it were the inevitable reply to Halton's argument.

"I am writing to Melton Hanney to do his best to give Captain Lewin every assistance in his power. He knows Port Cecil well. Had the Government been advised by me they would have put the matter in his hands, instead of which they have insisted on my sending some one from here. There is only my A.D.C. to send."

"I see." Halton's hand was still on the noted passage. His eyes followed the slight shrug of Gregory's mighty shoulders, while he felt with savage impotence that one might turn a tiger from its prey, sooner than this man from his purpose. Halton would not have dared to do the thing that he saw as plainly as its perpetrator; and because he knew he dared not, he hated the man who could and would with a hate born of self-knowledge.

"Melton Hanney is an old friend of yours, is he? You know him as a good man?" he said.

"I have known him for about sixteen years," said Gregory grimly. "And watched successive Governments pass him over for good work done." This was the man of whom Leoline had spoken to Blanche Stern.

"I have no doubt he is the right person to consult on such a situation. Knowledge on the spot is beyond value," said Halton, rising from his chair, and laying the book still open on his table. "I am

going down to see White, Gregory. As yet I am not a marked man ; but if you take my advice you will not ride alone through Port Victoria at present. The niggers are fit to dance the *Cannab Dance* for you !"

"The curs—I wish they had spirit enough ! No, there might be the makings of a fight at China Town, but our mixed breeds will hardly show their teeth here. If you are going to see White, Halton, I wish you would ask him to come up early to-morrow, unless he would prefer to meet me at the office at eleven. I have business to discuss with him."

"I shall recommend his coming here," said Halton, with a slightly strained smile. "In spite of your contempt for them I should not be surprised to find a deputation of these 'mixed breeds' waiting on you—with razors. If I were in your position, I tell you frankly I should ask the O.C.T. for a picket."

"There's a shambok on the wall there," said Gregory with quiet significance. "It would answer the same purpose—and is quite handy."

He did not turn his head as Halton's retreating steps died away from the room, but he noticed with more interest the sound of a little silver clock striking eight. He often worked up to ten o'clock at night, and had come back to write his letters direct from the dinner-table. The one to Melton Hanney was too long for an official document, and more private than he had indicated to Halton. He intended giving it to Alaric Lewin to deliver direct, and had cabled in cypher to Hanney to inform him of his advent. As he directed and sealed the envelope it struck him that the room was hot, and he rose and opened the long window-doors on to the stoep, passing Halton's table as he did so. The

book lay open where the Commissioner had left it, and with a passing wonder as to what he had been reading, Gregory's eyes fell upon it and discovered that it was an old Bible, probably kept there for purposes of oath-making.

The Administrator took the book up deliberately in his strong hands, and looked to see what had engrossed Alfred Halton so deeply. He remembered how the flicker of the thin pages carefully turned, behind him, had worried his ear while he tried to concentrate all his thought and care upon the letter to Hanney, for it had been a dangerous letter to write, and every word had been weighed. Even then he had found it necessary to seal it, and would have to apologise to Lewin when asking him to deliver it. Halton had been looking for something, or he would not have turned those pages with such intent. Evelyn Gregory held up the faded print to the light.

It was the story of Uriah.

"And it came to pass in the morning that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah.

"And he wrote in the letter, saying, Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die.

"And it came to pass, when Joab observed the city, that he assigned Uriah unto a place whence he knew that valiant men were.

"And the men of the city went out, and fought with Joab; and there fell some of the people of the servants of David; and Uriah the Hittite died also."

Certain passages in his own letter rose in Gregory's mind as distinctly and slowly as the note of the little silver clock when it had chimed out the hour. "I am forced to send a fool, because Gov-

ernment have cabled . . . but I can only rely on you to do your best to save his mistakes, and get us out of the mess if he hashes it. . . . Do you remember Barotse, and the night you said you owed me more than a life? Well, if you want to pay, back me up now. . . . Lewin is one of those favoured animals with Friends. I am always being urged to make a show for him. Don't take his place, but follow him up and cover his tracks. If the fool has anything in him it must show up now. Give him a free hand—it is the consequences I want you to manage. I know I am asking a hard thing of you, all the work and no pay; but then I could trust no one else, if that's *Salama* to you. . . . *Above all, keep Lewin in the front of things.*"

He put down the Bible with a steady hand, and his iron jaws closed slowly, hardening his face into its ugliest lines. Yet for a moment he stood by the table thinking, and facing his own letter unflinchingly, as he saw it in his mind, side by side with one written dusty centuries ago by another strong man to his captain.

"Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the battle——"

"Above all, keep Lewin in the front of things."

He was roused by the door being opened, because no attention had rewarded the servant's patient tapping, but he looked at his master apologetically.

"A lady wishes to see you, sir!" he breathed rather than spoke, as if his own extraordinary message confused him.

"A lady!" Gregory glanced involuntarily at the little silver clock; it pointed to half-past eight.

"It is Mrs. Lewin, sir, she said she must see you for a minute."

"Ask her to come in here," said Gregory, turn-

ing his back suddenly upon the man. He looked at the open window half as if he would have closed it, and at the shaded light half as if he would have extinguished it, for his face was out of control. Even when he turned round to meet his visitor, he offered her his hand in silence, and she was vaguely surprised that he seemed to have suddenly gone bloodless. The big veins swelled on his temples though, and his eyes looked sunken and cavernous. She heard the door shut slowly, and fancied that the servant who had admitted her shared her curiosity and would fain have lingered. All personal feeling and sense of embarrassment had been swept from her mind by the events which had overwhelmed her in the last few hours, and she did not remember that she had not really met the man standing before her since his hand had rested on hers at the picnic. She was not an impulsive woman, and yet it had been impulse that had made her send Ally to Maitso, impulse that had made her wait feverishly for the moment of his departure, that had hurried her feet along the familiar garden and through the grounds of Government House the instant his pony's hoofs died away down the hill. She was devoured by a desire to know why Gregory had done her this ill turn, and was sending her husband to certain failure, for he knew Alaric's incapacity as well as she. It was impulse now that drove her forward a step towards him, and made her voice low and hurried as she spoke straight to him without any more formal greeting.

"Why have you done this? Are you mad? What has made you send him to Port Cecil instead of to Sir Geoffrey?"

He was looking at her with his long, hard stare, taking in every line of her white figure in its feminine softness and beauty. Her hair was waved

back from her forehead more than usual, as if she had pushed it there in her impatient thought, and beneath her delicate drawn brows her velvet eyes were alight as if with pain. He felt stupid with passion, and remembered with a curious thrill the occasion on which he had seen her in her night-dress, her hair thrown back from her forehead with much the same effect, and the same strained look in her eyes—it seemed that her husband was always the cause of her looking so.

She had taken a step forward. He took one also, and they stood close together, with nothing to hinder their direct gaze into each other's faces. His whispering voice was horribly audible, and yet suppressed as he answered her.

"Mrs. Lewin, you have asked me to do my best for your husband, and give him a chance if Government referred to me to recommend him. I am giving him a chance. What reason have you to complain?"

She threw out her hands with a little movement of desperation, almost as if she would have seized his arm and shaken him. "Oh, don't lie, now!" she exclaimed. "Tell me the truth—the truth! You know he may ruin himself if he goes without me. Why did you not send us to this other appointment that was put in your hands? If you had mentioned his name, instead of Captain Nugent's, to Sir Geoffrey Vaughan, we should have been moved from here together. Why did you not do it?"

He did not ask her how she had known of his private letter from the old general. He stood and looked at her still, and moistened his lips as if he could hardly speak. She saw his tongue touch them like a wicked snake before the words would come. He bent a little more towards her, and his lidless eyes probed hers mercilessly.

"Because I could not part from you!" he said distinctly, and yet he seemed to speak without a real note in his voice.

She fell back in exactly the same mechanical way that she had gone forward, and her eyes blinked before his as if before too strong a light. Very slowly she lifted her pretty hands and laid them over her breast as if with an unconscious effort to quiet the throbbing of the pulses there. He had not moved; but her voice was almost as toneless as his, when she spoke, from utter terror.

"Do you realise what you are doing? That it is not only his own career that Ally may risk, but —but the whole situation in East Africa. If he bungles it you will be held responsible!"

He bent his head so slightly that it seemed he hardly moved.

"Yes, I know it."

"And you——?"

Their eyes still met. She drew a sharp breath as if she stood suddenly in too strong an air. It seemed to her as if the personality of the man buffeted her, and she could not stand against it. She was afraid of any one who could gamble with Government like this, and stake empires for his own hazard. It was sweeping her off her feet, and leaving her helpless in a vortex of feeling she was not able to control. Her own nature she thought she could fight and conquer, but she saw with sudden panic that the one before her was beyond her, yes or no—she might influence, but she could not dominate it as she had her husband's. If he had chosen to take her savagely in his arms, she could have protested, but she could not have averted the embrace by the power of her will. Hitherto Leoline Lewin had drawn an invisible line of demarca-

tion between herself and mankind, and had known that none would dare to overstep it. But this man would not be conscious of the line. Nothing but his own restraint could save her from the peril of touch at least.

The windows still stood wide open to the windless night. She was waiting for she knew not what, when Gregory suddenly turned his head, listened, and faced round from her towards the apertures. The stars struggled against the electric light to make the stoep a grey vagueness, and it stretched, empty and silent, beyond the house itself. For a minute there was nothing but the whirring of the crickets, and the shrill wearisome cry of a tree frog that pierced the hearing. Then through all the natural clamour of tropical darkness came the rustle of human presence, the tread of feet, and the sound of many voices rising from the gardens. Something white rushed on to the stoep, and at the same moment Gregory had made a stride for the light and turned it off. His own figure and Mrs. Lewin's must have been sharply visible a second before from the garden outside, as they stood in the strong light of the room, objects for missiles or bullets; but as he walked forward to the intruder he alone was in view.

"What is it, Ahmed?" he said.

The man was one of his own servants, an Arab, and with more than an Arab's craven fear of danger in his quivering body at the present moment. He stood shaking and sweating, his words broken with fright as he tried to speak.

"They have passed the gate! They are coming up here! Quick, Effendi!—get to the stables and ride for the barracks! The soldiers will fight for us!"

Mrs. Lewin, standing in the dusk of the room

behind him, saw Gregory take the man by his linen tunic, swing him over like an inconsiderable bundle, and roll him along the stoep out of his way. Then he stepped quickly to the wall and took something in his hand. She caught the long quiver of a shambok as he spoke to her briefly over his shoulder.

"There is going to be a noise, I expect, but it won't be much. It is only a lot of niggers come up to call me out and protest about the crops. Can you load a revolver?"

"Yes!"

"Well, do so, and shoot as many blacks as you like. The more the better. There is a revolver in the second drawer of that table, and cartridges."

"Won't you have it?"

"No; this will do for me. I should like to flay half-a-dozen, and teach them how the Kaffirs die under this thing!" The shambok quivered ominously, and the roused blood in his veins was evidently finding an outlet in the hope of savage assault. She shuddered a little as his large gaunt figure vanished through the window on to the stoep.

The "deputation" that Halton had foretold was a motley crowd, and by sheer force of numbers rather than belligerence, had pushed the sentry aside and swarmed up to the house in an unorganised attack. Amongst the half-drunken niggers who were dancing amicably amongst themselves instead of forming up with the semblance of an opposing force, the little blue figures of the Chinese were visible, and all the anger of the assembly seemed to be concentrated in them. As Gregory stalked on to the stoep the clamour rose, the half-hysterical ribaldry of the blacks clearing to threats and words, and the Chinamen jabbering like monkeys. Through it all the

cry of the Malagasy "Ra!" (blood) cut the tumult like a clear bass note.

The Administrator leaned over the rail, gripping it with his lean hands, and looking down at the upturned faces with his hard stare. The insolence of his attitude seemed to half rouse, half tame the crowd. They wavered, but the sing-song snarl which Mrs. Lewin had heard in the hour of the Miroro, went on like an accompaniment to the crickets. Words were indistinguishable, but some one on the outskirts of the throng flung a cocoanut which hit the zinc roofing of the stoep, and, as if it were a signal, half-a-dozen blue figures swarmed over the railing and made a rush for Gregory. Leoline had moved by instinct nearer the window, with the loaded revolver in her hand. She remembered that Halton had said that Gregory loved a row, for she heard him laugh shortly, as if in enjoyment of his own excitement, while he stepped back and awaited them. No other missile was flung as she expected it would be, but she wondered if the crowd were armed with razors as the rioters had been before. Then she saw a curious sight, for the first of the Chinamen to approach too near was caught by the swing of the supple shambok and fell on his back with the breath knocked out of him, and Gregory advanced on the others, literally sweeping the stoep clear again by the force of his swinging blows. The hide whickered viciously as it cut the still air, and once a shriek answered its awful "Whir-r-r-r-r-h!" telling how the blow had caught its victim. The absolute and savage contempt with which he whipped them off the stoep, like curs, gave the woman watching him a revelation of the abhorrence in which the Englishman really holds the alien, and especially after many years spent amongst coloured races. She had met

with something of it in her husband, and learned more from Captain Gilderoy's frank brutality in speaking of them; but now she saw and realised. Gregory kicked the last man into the garden and came back to her laughing horribly. The curious part to her was that they did not resist, and he did not even wait to see the humming crowd melt away into the darkness as it was fast doing.

"If there were any organisation among them they might be worth killing," he said, taking the revolver from her. "As it is I would have made an example of one of those Chinamen—shamboked him so that he would brew no hashish!—if you had not been there. But it's not a pretty sight."

"Are they gone?" she asked with stiff lips. The march of events seemed to have stunned her. She had a sick feeling that she could bear no more, and that she had lived through crisis after crisis in a few hours, which would in an ordinary way be spread over as many years.

"They will be in a few minutes, but if you will excuse me I will just go and give orders to see that the grounds are quite clear before you walk back."

She was thankful that the sudden incursion of natives seemed to have deferred any further scene between them. He was alert and full of fire, but it was not directly for her, though he took elaborate care for her escort back to the bungalow, and accompanied her as far as the garden gate himself.

"Tell your own servants to keep a look-out," he said. "But I expect Captain Lewin will hear that there was a threatened row and come up in hot haste to look after you." He dismissed the Arabs who had accompanied them, with a nod, and held out his hand to her. "Good-night!" he said in a gentler tone, that made her nerves shoot with fear-

ful anticipation. "You were very good and brave. I hope you were not much frightened."

"I do not think I realised it all at the moment—you were so cool over it."

"Because there really was no immediate danger. That was not an organised attack—it was a foretaste of what might happen. That is why I am obliged to detain the Commissioner—to confirm my action should a real riot break out." He looked at her straight, and she saw that he feared no real danger, and that this was the assertion he meant to fling in the face of the world as his excuse for keeping Halton and sending her husband away—she saw it, but it fell on stunned senses. No one who had seen him to-night would believe that he could fear an attack, however organised, or see any necessity to detain the Commissioner. But she had borne all she could bear at present. She wished him good-night, and turned towards the lights of her own house, like one walking in her sleep.

"Good-night!" he said again, and looked round him, from the dusky garden to the gate which her hand had closed between them, and along the dark pathway to Government House. "When there was a threatened riot before, and I roused you up, I came by the road, for I was riding. But this is the best path on foot. I have never been this way—before."

CHAPTER XIII

"He that would have a good revenge, let him leave it to God."
—*English Proverb.*

CAPTAIN LEWIN'S bearer was what Mr. Halton would have described as an "average idiot" among niggers, but he was anxious to earn his fee, and his anxiety increased his intelligence to a disastrous extent. As soon as he got out of his employer's range of vision, of course his shambling trot degenerated into a saunter, and he loafed up Maitso Hill, calling out salutations to the natives whom he met coming down from work, for they employed black labour at the garrison. Still he did not absolutely stop, even to talk to the rickety trains of mule carts, whose drivers began a high-pitched conversation with him as soon as they came within sight. No Key Island nigger waits to begin his gossip until he is close to his friend; most of his conversation is screamed in patois from one end of a street to another, as his acquaintance comes round a corner, and the mixture of bastard Arabic, and African-Dutch, and what he thinks is English, bound together by long, lovely Malagasy words, is, to say the least of it, peculiar. By dint of keeping on, however, even at a saunter, the bearer reached the Churtons' bungalow in some half-hour's time after he started from the club, and came soundlessly through the screen of logwood, his bare feet lost in the dust, and guided by the lights that twinkled from the stoep.

Before he reached the house itself he saw one of

its inmates approaching leisurely, and paused himself, because it would have been waste of energy to take the few extra steps and call up the mistress, when here was the master of the house already at hand. Major Churton was smoking, the red end of his cigar looking like a strayed fire-fly among the light logwood leaves as he advanced, his big person very big indeed in its white linen and looming through the dusk like a substantial ghost. He had come out in the hope of getting more air than was possible on the stoep, and being in canvas shoes his advance was almost as soundless as the nigger's. Both men stared at each other through the darkness as if to make sure of the other's personality,—Major Churton because he did not expect to see a ragged loafer from the town about his house after dusk, and Captain Lewin's bearer because he saw the end of his responsibility before him if this were really the Bimbashi (Major).

"Well, what do you want?" said Churton shortly.

"A letter, Baas!" The man drew it out of the rags that covered his breast, and shifted from one foot to the other in the dust, with an apologetic smile on his vacant face. He held the letter to Churton and nodded insistently.

"For me?" said the Major as he took it. It was too dark to see the inscription, but he held the cigar between his large white teeth and broke the seal, moving into the faint light from the stoep to decipher it.

"Yaas, Baas. Captain Lewin sent it—I give it to you yourself!"

The man had jumbled his orders, and in all good faith believed that the letter was to go to the owners of the bungalow direct—whether the Bimbashi or the Missus had it, did not enter his head as of

importance, for he thought the point was that it should not pass through the hands of the servants. Having delivered his message he did not linger in the hope of a reward at this end of his journey, for Major Churton's crisp manner was not encouraging; he hurried off to catch his employer still at the club and claim his fee, and with a brief "Efenin', Baas!" his noiseless figure shambled into the darkness again, and departed down the hill.

But Major Churton did not answer the salutation. He was standing close against the railing of the stoep, but necessarily below it, as the bungalow was lifted a foot or so above the ground on account of snakes. The man's shoulder reached the top of the rail, and he held the letter carefully so that the light beyond fell across it. It touched his own face, too, and showed two deep furrows between his brows, and the grey in his thick dark hair—such a slight sprinkling from the hand of time that it hardly showed unless in such a full light. Somewhere in that lighted house his wife was busy over feminine affairs of her own; she was not in this front room, however, otherwise by lifting his eyes he could have seen her. He was vaguely glad of that even in the first shock of his surprise, for he was always afraid of his own temper.

Ally had not begun that letter even in an informal manner, or the "Dear Di" would have prevented Major Churton reading further. It was unguarded in its phrasing, and incriminating to a degree in which he had never written before, because he knew he was going away. To a jealous nature there was no question as to the meaning of its references; but just because Bute Churton knew his own power of anger he was terribly just, and kept an iron control over his judgment. He would not be sure—not quite yet. He would wait and see if

the woman made this ugly suspicion a certainty by any incautious speech on her part. He thought for a moment of going down to the club now, whence this had come, and dealing direct with Lewin; but he was not sure—the letter he was mechanically twisting and crushing in his strong fingers was no proof of anything but a dangerous intimacy—no literal proof at least—and there was plenty of time to-morrow.

He looked down at the letter again, and tried to piece the matter out. For years Di and he had gone their own ways, and he had made no fuss over the succession of men who had been her dubious "friends," because through some infatuated belief in a man's own wife being different from other women, he had fancied that she was always on the safe side—she had certainly always kept herself beyond the range of scandal, if not gossip. Had the theory of the thing even drifted through his mind, as an indiscretion of the past, he might have shut his eyes to it. It was as an actual experience of the present that made it a hideous and impossible position. A general tenet with regard to loose morals is a very different thing to the example which affects one personally. The most broad-minded people in profession are generally the least charitable in practice.

He stood out there in the darkness until he had regained his grip on himself, and thought that he was cool. He could not re-read Ally's letter, so he put it in his pocket for further consideration, before deciding to give it to Diana. Perhaps also he hoped that Lewin's departure meant nothing to her such as the letter suggested; if she did not read Ally's urgent request to her to ride down and say good-bye to him, it might not occur to her. He would give her that chance.

They had already dined, and the table was cleared and reloaded with the Tantalus and soda-water, when he entered the dining-room. Diana came in as he was helping himself to whiskey,—sparingly, this time,—and flung her writing-case on to a distant table with a movement suggestive of weary impatience.

"It *is* hot!" she remarked. "I'll have some claret and soda,—leave me some ice, Bute." She mixed it for herself, and spoke as she did so. "Have you heard when the *Greville* is going?"

"No!"

"Didn't you see Captain Stern this morning at the club?"

"Yes. He didn't say."

"Bother!" said Diana frankly. "I must telephone through the first thing."

"Where?"

"To the Lewins, of course. They will know."

"Why?"

The monosyllables did not warn her, for his voice was perfectly under control. And his back was towards her as he helped himself to another cigar from the box on the sideboard.

"I'm going down to see old Ally Sloper off if he goes in the middle of the night!" said Diana shortly. The openness of the speech sounded brazen to him to-night, for he forgot that yesterday it would have passed him by. In her certainty of being secure from his suspicion she took no trouble to disguise her motives, and she was in some sort desperate also. The feeling that had been half-hearted on Ally's side had grown to painful intensity on Diana's until her fondness for him made her as weak as he.

"He will probably start early, and only his wife will be there. I shouldn't make myself an unwelcome third if I were you."

"Half the place will be there!" said Diana, with an unnatural laugh. "You know we always turn up to see the last of any one, it's one of the few little distractions left us. Of course I shall go—Chum won't mind."

"I never argue," said Churton, the cigar between his teeth making the words sound ominously as if he had set them. "All I have to say is that if I were you—I shouldn't go."

For a minute she looked up sharply, and her heart throbbed with fear of him. He was standing at his full height, and though she was not a small woman, he made her feel suddenly that his masculine strength might be brutal—in any case that she was but a child to him, physically. Then with the old sore sense of injustice that has rankled in woman from all generations, she set his sins beside her own, and demanded dumbly if he could throw the first stone, even though he knew! He did not guess, of course—she would not harbour that idea; but even if he did he had no right to accuse her. She shut her lips in a hard line, and said no more.

Churton looked at her also for a moment. He saw the hard, sun-scorched face and the embittered lips, and perhaps he thought of the red-haired girl he married. Diana was never untidy—her head was as sleek and well-groomed now as a racer's coat, and below the collar line her neck was milk-white where her evening dress betrayed its original beauty. She had the transparency peculiar to red-haired women, and there was neither flaw nor fleck on her shoulders.

They went up to bed in silence, and the peace between them remained unbroken. She could hear him moving about in his dressing-room for a while, but she was undressed and asleep before he lay down by her side, and she was unaware that he lay hour

after hour, awake and thinking, piecing one thing in with another, proving his own dishonour, and unconsciously

"Nursing his wrath to keep it warm."

He thought himself cool and collected, while the smouldering fury in him burned steadily to white heat. He had always been afraid of his own temper—it was cheating him now.

Diana woke early, for she had fallen asleep wishing to do so, and thinking that her husband was still oblivious of her she slipped out of bed and began to do her hair rapidly. She glanced at him once, and saw that he was lying on his back as he often did, the covering sheet thrown off him, and one perfectly-moulded knee drawn up, which was also a habit of his. He would sleep so, and she thought his eyes were closed now without more than a cursory glance. He was, in fact, not much in her thoughts, though again it flitted across her mind that his large supine limbs suggested terrible strength. He was a splendidly-built man—as well built as Alaric Lewin, though his added years had thickened him somewhat—and even the raised knee was rounded with a massive beauty that would have pleased a sculptor.

By and by she found that the linen gown she wanted hung in a closet outside her room, on the other side of the passage. She slipped out almost noiselessly to get it, and as she returned she heard a clock somewhere in the house strike four. She was in plenty of time, but the last report of the *Greville's* departure which had reached her had been stated at five, and the grooms must saddle up for her at once. She did not wait to telephone to the Lewins after all, for fear of hindering herself rather than otherwise. The thought occupied her mind,

so that when she re-entered the room she did not notice that her husband had gone.

There was no time for a bath now, she could have that later when she had ridden up the hill again, and was dusty and hot. Ally would be gone then —gone at least for a month, for no one expected the trouble in East Africa to last longer. A month was long enough—a month without Ally! She did not realise that she had grown a foolish woman, whose empty heart could not feed for ever on passing attractions, and so craved greedily to really fill itself, though with an unsatisfying love. Alaric Lewin had been like a renewal of youth and its possibilities; he was young and vital, and his very lack of purpose made him seem like a boy far into his manhood. She was clinging to the thought of him, when she saw her husband enter quietly from the dressing-room.

He was in his shirt, but the sleeves were rolled up to the elbow over his muscled arms. He seemed to have been washing, for he held a towel loosely in one hand. She noticed vaguely that it was wet, or had been dipped in water and wrung out. It looked almost like a rope-end, twisted in that way.

Conscious that her own shoulders were bare, she resented the unusual intrusion of his entrance, and turned on him curtly.

"I have not finished dressing," she said. "You can't have this room yet. What do you want?"

"Why are you up so early?" he returned, as curtly as she had spoken.

"I am going down to see the *Greville* off!"

"You *will* go?"

Her eyes met his, the hard brown of them reddish with anger. "Yes, I will!" she said boldly.

He laid a tumbled letter before her, spreading it

out that she might see the familiar writing, and speaking carefully, as though he picked his words.

"Captain Lewin's bearer gave me this in the dark last night, telling me it was for me—I could not see the address, and he had evidently made a mistake, for he insisted on my reading it. You can see for yourself——"

He broke off, waiting with a terrible patience while she glanced over the page. There was no need to tell her more openly what she was to see, but her face hardly altered save that it was frankly insolent as she looked at him.

"I won't say anything about your reading my letters," she said, "because you say it was by mistake. The only thing I will say is that you have no right to question me. I have never read any of your letters, by mistake or otherwise, but——"

She flung the taunt at him, and saw his face darken. Well, if there was to be a row she did not mind much. Her rage at being found out, and the pain of losing Ally at the same time, made her like some fierce animal that turns to bay and longs to fight. It would not be an open scandal—she knew that instinctively. Let him do his worst!

He interrupted before she could accuse him further.

"That is beside the point. You will not go down to see the *Greville* off."

"I *will!*"

He caught her by the arm, his fingers closing like iron on the white flesh, and with his other hand he brought the wet towel down heavily across her bare shoulders. She was right in saying that it was the equivalent of a rope-end—it had been tightly wrung out, and it fell heavier than a rope. The long red weals followed each cut, and she set her teeth under the pain.

He had not said a word more, and she did not cry out. It never occurred to her to struggle, for she was like a child in his grip, and it would but have completed her humiliation. The hot anger and grief in her heart swelled up and choked her, and the temper he had justly feared blinded him. The first he knew of the weight of his own blows was his wife slipping quietly to his feet, her bruised shoulders a sickening witness to his strength.

He lifted her and laid her in bed again, drawing the sheet over her up to her neck. Then he closed the shutters and barred out the dreadful daylight, and before he left he mechanically sprinkled her face with water and saw the colour coming back to her lips. Di was too strong to swoon like other women—she had never gone off like this before, except—except at Agra when the child died. He was not sorry as yet; he did not feel anything except a grim satisfaction that she would not attempt to see the *Greville* off now.

He finished dressing and ordered his own pony, riding off in the cool of the morning to the town. He had not heard, as his wife had, of the crusier's probable departure at daybreak, for her information had come from Mrs. Ritchie Stern the day before, and in Lewin's letter he had not been sure when they would go—at least, he had said he was not sure. When Major Churton rode on to the wharf the first reaction came over him and took the momentary form of disappointment, for fading out of the harbour, her smoke a trail on the horizon, was the cruiser, and he saw that he was too late. Then the other view of what he had done rose before him, and the blind passion that had driven him into immediate revenge on the person nearest at hand seemed to die out with the *Greville's* smoke trail. He should have dealt with the man first, not with

that poor woman, whose hinted accusations were true enough when one was cool to listen to them. He had been too angry to heed, and his conscience did not accuse him of vices more than other men's, while it had seemed to him that she was worse than many wives. He had been unjust to begin with—brutal to end with. In his stupid rage he had let Lewin go scot free, while the woman bore the brunt of it. His eyes followed the *Greville* over the edge of the horizon with the keener humiliation because he was a strong man with the reserve which many years had taught him, and it was bitter to realise himself in the wrong. He had believed in his own manliness at least; now he felt that he despised himself, and he was too honest to prevaricate.

There were not many people on the wharf, for Captain Stern's movements had been left uncertain until the last moment. Mrs. Ritchie Stern and Mrs. Lewin were standing together close to the water's edge, as if unanimously they had pressed after the ship as far as they dared. Their ponies were held at a little distance, Liscarton's vagaries making it unsafe to take him very near the unguarded edge of the quay. The Commissioner was there too, and Arthur White and Brissy Nugent, no one else. It was White who saw the motionless figure of the O. C.T. first, and rode up to him.

"Ah, Churton! You were too late," he said, shaking hands cordially. "I was afraid you might be. It's an awful pull to get down from Maitso so early."

"Yes!"

The grave face under the white helmet made the Attorney-General leap to a wrong conclusion.

"Were you ordered out last night? No? Heard nothing of the row?"

"Where was it?" The steady, dark eyes came

back from the last glimpse of the *Greville* and fixed themselves on White's red pleasant face.

"At Government House. Halton has just been telling me. He knew nothing of it, any more than I, for he rode down to see me last night, and didn't get back until eleven or half-past. I'm to meet the Administrator later, but I don't suppose I shall hear much more. He makes light of it—says it was a flash in the pan, and rather amusing, but I know I shouldn't have cared to face a couple of hundred niggers after the ultimatum about the crops. I'm going to ask Mrs. Lewin what really happened."

"Mrs. Lewin!"

"Yes, she was in it all. Lewin had gone down to the club to say good-bye to you all, I suppose—you missed him, by the way?" ("Yes!" said Churton bitterly, "I am sorry I did!")—"and Mrs. Lewin heard something of the disturbance and got in a funk and rushed up to Government House. Very sensible thing to do, only unfortunately she got into the middle of it."

This was Gregory's very natural explanation of her presence there, as Mrs. Lewin had already found. She accepted it dully, with an added feeling of fear at his facility. Churton's eyes wandered to her for a minute across the quay, and he thought she looked as if last night's strain and this morning's parting had tried her, and was gentler than usual in his manner when she greeted him.

"I am sorry you arrived too late to see Ally," she said, "he hoped to catch you at the club last night. I was to say good-bye for him."

He thought of that helpless figure with scarred shoulders that he had laid on the bed, but he did not wince. His voice, as he asked her about the trouble at Government House, was so kind and

sympathetic, that it came to nearer making her break down than all that had gone before.

"I was very much frightened," she said. "Though Mr. Gregory says that there was no danger. He cleared the stoep with a shambok—that was all!" She tried to smile, and her eyes were rather misty.

"You look as if you had had about enough of it!" he said, unconscious of the effect of the morning sunlight on his own face. He wished too that she had not, with her few words, drawn him a picture of Gregory and the shambok—it reminded him of his own action this morning. Men like himself and Gregory—men proud of their masculine quality of strength—seemed of a brutal type to him just now.

"I feel rather as if I had been to three balls all at once, and danced into daylight—that is all. Dissipation always gives me the same cheap feeling as a great strain. Mrs. Stern is coming home to breakfast with me to cheer me up, she is leaving in the mail this afternoon, unfortunately, or I should try and persuade her to stay for a few days."

"I hear there is another cruiser signalled at Port Albert," said Mrs. Ritchie, as she turned from Arthur White, to whom she had been talking. "The *Skate* I think it must be—I suppose you all know Captain Tullock? The bay will be quite lively this afternoon with our departure and his arrival. I shall see your wife then, of course, Major Churton?"

"She is seedy this morning, but she may feel well enough to come down," he said composedly. "Good-bye, Mrs. Lewin, take care of yourself."

She wondered why he was so particularly kind to her, and if he would have been could he only have known all the inward workings of her heart!

Life would be a little humiliating were it not for its power of secrecy. As Bute Churton's big figure disappeared along the narrow street to the town, Leoline looked after him and guessed nothing of the irony of their relations with each other, for he was thinking that worthless fellows like Lewin were blessed with wives like this, while she shrank from

"Major Chu[illegible] looks very ill," she said. "I never noticed it before; but I am sure he ought to get away. I have grown selfish with my own concerns."

"He looks as if he had had some kind of shock," said Mrs. Ritchie, with her fatal intuition. "I wonder what made him late!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE confidence of two young married women is amongst the most interesting experiences to be obtained; but it is about as easy to get at by an outsider as a Masonic ceremony of initiation. For a time they are bound to skirmish over the surface of facts, and compare notes on their households. From this they may advance to their husbands, but it is not till they reach Themselves and their own point of view that they are really instructive. Had Mrs. Ritchie Stern been remaining in Key Island, it is possible that she and Mrs. Lewin might have reached that stage when a broken sentence conveys more to the sympathetic hearer than a whole explanatory treatise would do to one who had not the key to such mysteries. But the hours she spent at the bungalow were too contracted for this; only the stress of their mutual circumstances could have made them get as far as stage number two, for they did talk of their husbands.

"I am glad Alaric has gone with Captain Stern," Leoline said frankly, because she had something to conceal in her piteous knowledge of Ally. "It makes the journey at least so much less tedious. And I hope they will be pals—that is my husband's inevitable word, so you must excuse it."

"It is so much more expressive than friends, or even chums," said Mrs. Ritchie pensively. "To

'pal' always suggests a comfortable arm-in-arm state of intimacy, eh?"

"Exactly! Ally makes friends rather easily." The last words were almost abrupt.

"I don't think Ritchie is so good at that as at listening. If you know what I mean, other men make friends with him, and he listens. I should think Captain Lewin was always very popular."

"Invariably. I cannot remember, on looking back through my life, any single person who knew Ally and disliked him."

"It is rather a fatal gift at times,—if you do not mind my saying so."

Chum did not answer directly. She spoke with a touch of unintentional wistfulness. "Captain Stern gave me a sense of such innate control. He is like one of those Biblical examples that are greater by reason of ruling themselves than the noisier men who take cities. It always struck me as such a very sane ideal. . . . I hope he will be a friend of Ally's!"

Mrs. Ritchie looked at her with the full bounty of her nature, and her words were not so irrelevant as they seemed.

"My eldest boy is like me rather than his father, and I am quite sorry! It is dreadful to have to look out for your own little failings, and recognise them. They seem such much more nasty little things in some one else; and yet I always know that they are just mine."

"You must hate leaving the children!" said Mrs. Lewin slowly—just as Blanche had meant her to do.

"Yes!" she responded. "But I would rather have them, though on the other side of the world. Just as I would rather have my sailor, even though I cannot always follow his ship."

"Captain Lewin has a great objection to having children while he is on foreign service—particularly in a hot climate," said Leoline quietly. She was looking down, her long lashes a brown shadow on her unflushed cheeks, and her manner was too composed for resignation. Suddenly she raised her eyes with a flash that seemed to come all across the room to Mrs. Ritchie.

"I was so awfully disappointed!" she said, almost in a whisper. "At first I longed for one——"

Her voice trailed into silence. Mrs. Ritchie held her breath. The hint of being contented with things as they were now frightened her.

"You will not always be abroad—at least in such places as this," she said hurriedly.

"No. One begins to see though, that there are more selfish advantages to be gained from married life without a nursery. It isn't that Ally doesn't want children—he will some day. But then—I mightn't, you see."

"You will," said Mrs. Ritchie consolingly. "Let alone the feeling you will have that you ought to (I wish we didn't have these feelings, but women keep the conscience of the household, always!), you will want to because it is natural. You needn't be afraid." She waited a minute, meeting those shining eyes steadily, and reiterated, "You needn't be afraid."

Leoline turned her face to the window, and looked across the garden, with its hot, dusty roses, to the latched gate through which Ally had gone to, and come from, Government House. At the gate a shadow stood, and a voice said, under breath, "I never came this way—before!" She thought of the child denied her because of Ally's selfish fear of discomfort, and the safeguard of its presence in her

arms now; for she might be called in this a good woman, that had she been a mother, she would not have been afraid, not even of that dangerous proximity. As it was, in spite of Blanche Stern's presence throughout the day, there was a horribly lonely feeling about the bungalow, and after the rush of her departure had died away, the empty rooms seemed as if they listened for a step. The fear of being alone and of listening also made Leoline Lewin insist on riding down to the harbour again to see her off, and for the second time in twenty-four hours she found herself loitering about on the wharf among the walls of coal, waiting with that horrible sense of departure for the boat to start. There is nothing more trying to those left behind than one of these lingering "send-offs"—the going on board and forced little conversations with one ear always attentive for the bell and "Any more for the shore?"—the interminable time of standing about on the quay while the mails are got in, and the boat turns so very slowly from the shore—the waving of handkerchiefs, and hollow cheering, and then the going home with a blank feeling that life is just the same in its dull grooves, and all the chance of movement and adventure has gone out with the ship beyond the horizon line. It is a particularly depressing ceremony in Key Island, whose inhabitants feel it a prison at the best of times, but it seems to possess a kind of hideous fascination to the residents, who never let a boat depart without thronging on the quay and wishing vainly that they were going with her.

There was a much larger gathering to see Mrs. Ritchie off than there had been for the *Greville*. The Gilderoys, Captain Nugent, the Arthur Whites, Miss Denver, Mrs. Clayton with the gunner's boy in tow,—Mrs. Lewin counted them over with

wearied eyes and found none missing save the Churtons. They were not there and Captain Gilderoy amicably suggested that Diana had got a headache from too many céhos, and the Major was forced to stay away to cover her indisposition.

"But does she drink, Captain Gilderoy?" Mrs. Clayton asked eagerly, her pretty vulgar face thrust up to his. She had experienced the roughness of Diana's manner when there was no need to be ingratiating, and sought for the joints in her armour.

"I didn't say that, Mrs. Clayton!" Captain Gilderoy raised his cynical eyebrows, and smiled as a dog snarled, on one side of his mouth. His "smiling acquaintance" with Mrs. Clayton had developed, with no desire on his part, to a more conventional one, and a further knowledge of her had intensified his sentiments with regard to her rather than otherwise. He disliked Mrs. Clayton every bit as much as he did Mrs. Churton, and his comments on her freedom from social restrictions were at least as withering as on Diana, but that Eva Clayton had not the capacity to guess. "I did not say she drank," he said in his most pleasant manner, "but she has the advantage of a strong head! She can take two drinks to my one; I have seen her get through two tumblers of whiskey and soda when I stopped prudently at the second."

"You don't say so!" Mrs. Clayton's loud, vacant laugh jarred after Gilderoy's polished words—he spoke charmingly, and his voice was deep and rather sweet,—and she caught her gunner by the arm.

"Mr. Rennie, listen! Captain Gilderoy says that Mrs. Churton drinks—that's why she isn't here today. She can toss off five whiskeys faster than the men. Disgusting, isn't it!"

Young Rennie was a fresh-faced boy, with eyes which still danced carelessly with youth. All Mrs. Clayton's tuition had not yet left its impress on his smooth, flushed face, but it was tainting his tongue.

"By Jove!" he said. "What fun! I'll have a drinking match with her one night—get her well on and stake glass for glass."

"Yes, do," Mrs. Clayton said eagerly. "It would be so amusing!" and Miss Denver turned round and laughed too, but without spite. She was a very tall girl, whose clothes were always a bad copy of the last garrison lady's who had come to the Station, and there was a certain exuberance about her that made women—nice women—say that she had something maternal even in her generous girlhood. Men, being coarser or more practical, called her a finely-built girl, and thought of the children she might bear them.

Leoline Lewin heard the comments on Di and the laughter, and moved by instinct a little nearer Mrs. Stern. Perhaps she was out of tune with her world to-day, but it seemed to her as if the whole of her surroundings were shoddy,—the very tone of the people was like the little native huts with their lack of stability and general uncleanness. When Brissy Nugent appeared at her side, as if her husband's absence constituted him her cavalier, she turned away almost like a pettish child with a feeling of aversion to his familiar burnt face and immaculate riding-dress. She felt as if she knew exactly what he was going to say, too, before he said it; but all Brissy's conversation appeared the inevitable.

"Old Ally Sloper must be somewhere about lat. 20 by now, I suppose," he said, as they stood at the liner's stern, waiting with melancholy patience to say good-bye to Mrs. Ritchie.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Hope you won't be very lonely."

"Do you?" For the life of her she could not avoid the little ironical question.

"Pity I'm not a woman, and then I could come up and stay with you and keep you company—eh? Wouldn't there be a lot of talk?"

"If you were a woman?"

"No, as we are. You knew what I meant, Mrs. Lewin."

Oh, this wearisome talk that led nowhere, and always had a vacant laugh in it. And the sameness of the fringe of ravenalas lifting solemn hands along the shore—and the blue bay—and the zinc-roofed, gim-crack town. She looked at the glare of sunlight on Maitso and Mitsinjovy, and her eyes ached, and then at the black walls of coal to cool them, as she had done hundreds of times before. They were all in the rat-trap, and her fellow rats were no better off than she—save that perhaps the others had not the soul-haunting sweet dread that she had put behind her all day. For when she was free of these people and went back alone to the bungalow, there was nothing to prevent her thinking of the nearness of Government House, and the short cut through the grounds, while all the rooms listened for a step.

She heard Hamilton Gurney urging some one to come and drink a final cého with the U.C.L. men, and her heart sank, for this was always a last ceremony. Then Mrs. Stern came up and said good-bye, her blue eyes very large and gentle, with their strange gift of divination, and by a mutual impulse the two tall women kissed each other. Even after the boat had swung out into the harbour and passed between the gates, Leoline stood watching it as she had the *Greville* that morning, as if it carried away

yet another barrier of her safety, and lingered to chat with one and another of her acquaintance. Captain Gilderoy came up to ask her if she were selling any of the ponies—she could not ride three during Captain Lewin's absence, and he rather fancied Snapshot. She caught at the discussion, and suggested his coming over one day to look at Nanton, Ally's last purchase.

"Will you come back with me now, you and Mrs. Gilderoy?" she said, with a strange eagerness. "And dine? I am very much alone."

"Thanks, I wish we could, but we are bound to the Jacksons'."

"Are they at By-Jovey? Another night then."

"Thanks."

No hope of rescue there! They all seemed to be engaged, those who had useful wives, and the unattached men she would not ask, with the pattern of Mrs. Clayton and Miss Denver before her eyes; for, as Mrs. Clayton passed her with Mr. Rennie, Leoline heard the latter say, "I've got the hump with that boat going—haven't you? Let's go up to the Denvers' and make a noise!" Mrs. Lewin's lips curled a little. She would not make her house into a recreation ground for the idle men of the Station, even though of better manners and more intellectual tastes than this fresh-faced boy, who after all, was harmless enough in his ill-breeding. "Let's go up to the Denvers' and make a noise" was no worse than "Let us drop in on Mrs. Lewin because her husband is away." No, such help as that would not do. She must face it alone.

The shadow of Tsofotra, the Sunset Gate, stretched far across the sea as she gathered up her reins and rode home by herself, with so little attention to the way she went that Liscarton took advantage to snatch a hasty supper from the low bushes and tall

grass, munching as he went, and expectant of a call to order that did not come. Mrs. Lewin had other thoughts to fill her mind, and as she sat at her solitary dinner, she faced the new problems of her existence with saddened eyes. It seemed to her as if her life "were all read backward," and her intentions twisted by providence to a horrible issue. She had been honest in her desire to spur her husband on to success, and her first efforts to attract Gregory had been actually on his behalf; but where had she gone astray? For the original strategy of arousing his interest for Ally's sake, coupled with a little innocent enjoyment of her own power no doubt, had gradually altered its quality to a personal pleasure in the companionship of a stronger nature, and so she had drifted to this dangerous brink of a new relation between them. Looking back, it seemed to her as if all the mischief had sprung from that night when she left her husband in a drunken sleep to cover his incapacity as best she might with the Administrator. And yet that night at least she had hardly realised that Gregory existed as a man: he was nothing but a power to be feared. She could not see the natural development of the situation from the affinity of such natures as Gregory's with her own, which was its feminine complement. All that her mind could grasp was the plain fact that bound in duty and honour to a man to whom she had submitted the most sacred rights of her womanhood, her very nature yearned treacherously away from him to another who stood for ever beyond the pale. Alaric had shown himself a weak man, and represented the failure of her life; but it was her instinct to hide her failures, and to make the best of her own action in marrying him, rather than to ask the world's sympathy and justify herself in infidelity. Where neither teaching nor principles

would triumph over Nature, her dear self-respect stands like a guardian angel to such a woman as Leoline Lewin, and becomes a giant virtue.

She took some work and moved into the further room when her dinner was over, a very gracious feminine figure with the atmosphere of civilisation about her dainty gown and *chic* head, contrasting strangely with the lawless tropical world outside the open windows. All the danger of the sensuous Earth seemed to be threatening her out of the night and its insinuating scents,—all the safety of convention to be inside the pretty room with its electric light where she sat. As the monotonous needle passed through and through the silk, she was schooling herself to fearlessness, and soothing her own nerves by the occupation, until she ceased to start at a rustle on the garden paths, and was no longer haunted by that mad fear of one man's approach. So composed had she grown at last, that she missed the very step that she had expected along the stoep, and the opening of the door by the butler. The first intimation she had that her fate was hard upon her was Abdallah's voice announcing the Administrator almost as he withdrew to his own quarters again.

She put aside the work on her lap carefully, running the needle in and out the silk that she might not lose it, and rose without hurry, every precious second gained helping her to recover her breath, which seemed to have been swept away by the sound of his name. As she came forward to meet her guest there was not a tremor about her, nothing but the composed grace of a well-bred woman in her own house.

Gregory had stood still under the electric lamps; the light was strong in spite of the soft red shades, and it seemed to show them to each other in merciless revelation. He held out his hand to take hers

in conventional greeting, and let it go again after the legitimate few seconds during which palm rests in palm. They had not really spoken to each other, save in broken disturbed sentences, since the Deputation interrupted his avowal of his reason for sending Lewin away alone. It seemed to her that they must take it up just there, as if nothing had intervened, and she sought desperately for something to avert it. The hours that lay between his whispering voice, saying that he could not part from her, and the present moment rolled back into nothingness. They were not, and this sentence to be answered still seemed to hang in the air.

"I saw Captain Lewin off this morning," she said baldly, as if proving that what he had said was true. He could not part from her—well, he had not. In another sense, the sentence was a warning that questioned his right to be there. "I saw Captain Lewin off this morning—I am alone!" added the significant pause.

"I know." He did not deny the accusation of his having paid her a visit at this late hour, if she intended to insinuate it. He accepted it rather, and a clock struck nine in the further room as if to punctuate and affirm his acceptance.

Then there was one of those strange pauses which seem like the visible boundary between one phase of existence and another—the possible crossing the rubicon, the possible drawing back and remaining in safety. It comes before many a declaration, while Mr. Brown and Miss Smith are still conscious of their former titles, though the next instant may convert them into John and Jane to each other.

"Oh, the little more, and how much it is!
And the little less, and what worlds away!
How a sound shall quicken content to bliss,
Or a breath suspend the heart's best play,
And life be a proof of this!"

so long ago. At least you could only have given me my *congé*. I don't understand beating about the bush, if that is all that one wants of a woman, because it can't be much loss if she says no—there are a great many more who will say yes!"

She thought of her husband's often assertion that "every woman in the island had had a try for Gregory's Powder," and winced to see that he had appreciated his own power of choice—if he had chosen. She almost hated her own sex for giving him some ground at least for the brutality of his speech, and herself for listening to him.

"With you," he went on, with that same terrible finality of a statement that could not be questioned, "it is different. I should be depreciating my own property. Some day I mean to make you my wife"—he drew a breath, and added her name, as if to say it were a natural joy—"Leo!" he whispered, the familiar contraction of Leoline giving her a little thrill of pleasure, even while it seemed dreadful to her that she felt she had no right to flinch from his bold statement. She had not thought over the situation without facing such an issue, as he had seen was inevitable, and she was too honest and too strong herself to weakly cry out that she had not considered this, or made up her mind. She had counted the cost to Alaric Lewin and to herself; perhaps passion weighed down the scale in which she placed her own risk, but she knew that her decision had been tacitly in favour of such a step as Gregory prognosticated to her mind by speaking of her as his wife. There was just one terrible difference in their point of view that she could not realise; his words simply meant to her the horrible publicity and degradation of the Divorce Court—but in his mind was that olden letter of which his own seemed a reflex—

"Set Uriah in the forefront of the battle . . . that he may die. . . ."

All the wrong against her husband that was credible to her was done to his name. That Alaric must suffer from the blow she saw, and knowing no injury that he had done her, it seemed an intolerable thing that she meditated in cutting the tie between them. She knew him for a weak man too; what would be the result, to a nature like his, of her desertion? If every fibre in her heart had not seemed to her to be rooted in the man beside her, she would never have permitted herself the choice; but for the time being her whole soul was in revolt, demanding its desire, crying out that its very life depended on the chance of happiness. She could not argue or reason just now; she felt the necessity of her own being a greater thing than the slighter nature's pain. Was she always to be sacrificed to Alaric's weakness? her heart cried out impatiently—Ally, who was as easily comforted as a child by a new toy for the one that had been broken! Within a week of her flight he would be playing tennis, and petted and consoled by other women for his unmerited misfortune. She saw him more harshly than ever before, and her velvet eyes grew sombre as she raised them to Gregory's watchful face. There was no remorse or vacillation in him—there would be no repining word hereafter. What he did he had stood by all his life, and he neither excused nor forswore himself. He was a hard man at worst—a strong man at best. Some day she would know him for unscrupulous, but always and for ever she would love him, because his qualities were the essential for her, and also because love goes deeper than reason and outruns rule.

"I am not asking you to take such a step tomorrow or next day," he urged in that under-

breathed voice, " only it would be unfair not to set my ultimate goal before you." Then his manner grew warmer, he half leaned against her lace-clad shoulder, and his arm stole around her waist. " Is it so hard to think of me as a husband, darling? I believe you are half afraid of me as a lover!"

She felt the masculine eyes above her dominating her, and her head drawn back against his shoulder. As he kissed her again and again, closing the velvet eyes and holding her lips with his own until she was breathless, his constraining clasp gradually bound her close to him. Through the thin linen suit she could feel every tightened muscle of his body, and for a moment was blinded by his caresses. She had not realised until then the feebleness of her own passions compared with his. It seemed as if he were built upon such a gigantic scale that lesser mortals dwindled beside him as beside one such as the old Greeks used to believe was endowed by a deity in parentage.

But when she slipped out of her gown that night she was conscious of a painful soreness, as though her soft elastic flesh had been badly bruised. There was no mark on the white skin, but she could not pass her hand down her side without feeling the hurt. It could not have been a blow, for a blow would have left a visible bruise. Yet her very muscles ached.

For a moment, as she rubbed her hand softly to and fro over the warm satin surface of her body, she could not understand the cause. Then her face flamed. She was half ashamed and half exultant. For she realised the strength of Gregory's clasp, and felt as Danaë may have felt in the grip of her god.

CHAPTER XV

"La paix n'est que le sommeil de la guerre."—*French Proverb.*

"THERE must be something wrong between the Churtons," said Mrs. Gilderoy, taking off her hat and sitting down beside Mrs. Lewin to chat.

"What is the matter?" asked Leoline, in some surprise. "I haven't seen Di for ever so long, though all the rest of you have been most good in cheering my solitude. Major Churton is away, isn't he?"

"He has gone for a ride round the island. That is how I know something is wrong. It is our one resource for mental disturbance—if a man has been refused, or a woman found out, they arrange to ride round the island until things calm down again. You see, we can't get out of it, so we begin to run round and round to ease our distress."

"Like rats in a trap!" said Mrs. Lewin absently, her mind with Halton's simile.

"Exactly. Churton said he was going to shoot on the Tableland, but young Rennie, who went out there some days later, found him starting for Africa Point and Sand Bay. He will come home by Hashish Valley, and I hope he won't come in for the trouble there!"

"There is no further disturbance, is there? Mr. Halton told me positively that he would leave in the next mail. But that may be desperation!"

"Poor man! I don't wonder. He has been kept hanging about on the chance of a rising, when he might just as well have gone by the same boat as

Mrs. Ritchie Stern. Look how tamely the snuff-coloured people took the crop-burning, after all!"

"Rather ominously so, I thought. I feel somehow as if we were not through yet."

"Well, what there was to see, you saw! I can't think how you lived through that night at Government House, Chum. I expected to see your hair grey next morning."

"It was really not so terrifying as it sounded afterwards. Mr. Gregory was so cool too—he was almost insolent to the natives."

"I suppose you expected to find Captain Lewin there. You have not heard anything of him, by the way—I mean cabled through from Capetown, for instance—have you?"

"Not a word. All I know is that the boat reached Port Cecil, and it was also confirmed that his regiment was up there."

"So he will have his friends about him, any way. It is a month since he left, isn't it? Aren't you very anxious?"

"No, I don't think so. It would be so unreasonable, because I know that I could not hear. If he wrote at once *viâ* Capetown the mail will bring it. But Ally is a bad correspondent, and if he were very much taken up with the business in hand he might forget and miss the mail. And I might never hear at all until he came back!"

"You take it very philosophically. I know if I didn't hear from my good man under the circumstances, I should begin writing abusive letters to the Government at Capetown."

"I think they find Key Island quite enough of a worry, without having to calm disaffected wives there, as it is," said Mrs. Lewin, with a pang of conscience. How often had she thought of Ally through these halcyon summer days that had drifted

past her so softly and easily—they seemed, on looking back, merely a golden haze? She had thought of him, indeed, as the fly in her amber, and had thrust the thought away when conscience pressed too hard. "I can't think why they brigaded us with South Africa," she added, more to dodge her own thought than with any real interest in the Home Government's disposal of the Empire. "Mauritius has its own governor; why shouldn't we?"

"We are too small. And besides, they never give Gregory's Powder an absolute monarchy—perhaps when he goes Key'land will be made a Crown colony. I am sorry for Capetown having such a firebrand tacked on to them, myself. He was under Milner once, and they nearly quarrelled; but the man of men he hates is Kitchener. Gregory always wants the troops at his instant disposal when he sets out to soothe the wily native, and Kitchener won't have it. Can't you imagine Gregory trying to snatch a few soldiers when the General is not looking, and the poor wretched officer in command being dragged in two, like a Christmas cracker, between them?"

"And going off with a bang," said Mrs. Lewin, laughing. "I am sure I should, in his place. Mr. Gregory started in the Army himself—you know that, of course."

"Yes; I believe he served with Roberts for a short time—a *very* short time! He never could obey his senior officers. So he was taken out of the Army and put into the Colonial service. Apropos of nothing, Chum, you are not looking well. When are you going to Vohitra?"

"I am too much afraid of your thinking it a proof of mental disturbance," said Mrs. Lewin, with a languid smile. "When people ride round the island it always begins at Port Albert, doesn't it?"

"Generally; though in very bad cases I have known them ride right through the Rano Valley, and up to Vohitra that way—on some one else's pony, of course. Do you notice that the pony is the pledge of affection here? We don't give engagement-rings—we give ponies. 'He has given her a pony' is tantamount to saying, 'they are engaged,' and if you ride any man's cattle save your husband's you are accepting serious attentions."

"What a dreadful thought! For we have never really bought Liscarton, Captain Nugent *would* lend him to me, and I am so dishonest that I have not returned him yet."

"Well, my dear, it is such a known thing that Bristles worships your untied shoestrings, and hangs upon the tilt of your Panama, that no one would be surprised if you took his entire stud!"

"I suppose I have no character!" said Mrs. Lewin resignedly.

"Not a shred! You are much too good-looking, and your clothes suggest Bond Street and general wickedness."

Again Leoline laughed, for she was content that Key Island should bracket her with Brissy Nugent. Her conscience was nearly dormant during those days, and only roused occasionally when a gust of remorse or realisation swept over her reasonlessly and made her shudder. Then it would pass, and she would face the situation steadily again. Had she been in England, among influences which had moulded her life, and with the chance of a larger outlook, she would not have deemed such a state of mind as her present one to be possible to her. That her whole self could be absorbed in a man whom to love was frankly dishonourable, would have seemed to her impossible while she had the intelligence to foresee and fight it down. But it is

impossible in a land policed by the conventions of countless generations, where at least one lives in wholesome fear of one's next-door neighbour, to realise or understand the influence of the waste places of this earth under the sway of the Imperial Government. Men lose their boundaries there, and be a woman what she will she is bound to feel the influence in her thoughts if not her actions. The laxity of the manners and morals in such rat-traps as Key Island is due to the opinion of the majority, for sin is after all a matter of the law of nations, and there is no universal standard of right and wrong. When the thermometer stands at 90° in the shade, and Society consists of forty persons who must go on meeting each other indefinitely, it is probable that the forty will tacitly agree to overlook each other's peccadilloes for the sake of comfort. And it is hard to be less charitable to one's own failings than one's neighbour will be.

The stronger nature with which she was in close intercourse, too, was influencing if it could not entirely dominate Leoline. Gregory had absolutely kept his word with regard to their relations with each other; he did not ask her for a material proof of her affection, but it was not in human nature that they should not be often together and alone without some such hint of passion as had overtaken them on the evening of Alaric's departure. His visits were spasmodic, and dependent to a certain extent on caution while Halton was still at Government House, but she never knew when he might not appear, and had given herself up to receiving him with a submission that yet kept her nerves on edge. Sometimes they merely talked—intimately, it is true, for he unfolded his plans to her as to no one else—but with hardly a kiss to disturb her pulses. It was a relief to Gregory to confide in a

mind which he found both receptive and capable of following him, even of counselling him at times. He made her the partner of plans he would not have trusted to a fellow-man, and would have missed her from his life as a confidante, apart from her attraction as a woman; for the craving for sympathy is as great as the craving for alcohol—once aroused, it becomes a habit, and is hard to satisfy. During the greater part of his life Gregory had taught himself to live alone, and regard men and women alike as likely to be a hindrance to him unless he could make a passing use of them. Now he had found a helpmate he meant to bind her to him by the strongest tie he could fashion.

Leoline gave regally in the expansion of all her forces, and made him the master of her brain and spirit as well as heart. Every vital power she had was at his disposal, and while she gloried in the bestowal she was troubled that her sensations were not all clear gain in perfect joy. The temperate, uncomplicated affection she had felt for Alaric had in a way made her less unhappy, if also less happy, which was disturbing. Take it how one will, being in love is not a comfortable process, provided it is a real case of unreasoning attachment between two human beings—unreasoning in that the advantages of such an attachment do not influence the feeling at all. No one really enjoys violent emotion, and of all experiences a sexual love is most likely to be violent, however it may differ in degree, through a warmer or colder nature. "All pleasure is negative," says Schopenhauer, for the fulfilment of a desire only concludes the pangs of it. Love as purely, as mentally as one may, it is a torturing joy —a bewildering experience that upsets and revolutionises the ordinary routine of life, and which one naturally resents. Who cares for the unused depths

of his being brought up to the surface, and forcing him to live in extremes? It is the memory of love which is divine; the present experience is by no means so pleasant, and sooner or later brings the pain that is only tolerable when it has passed.

On the day when Mrs. Gilderoy came to see her, Leoline was looking forward to the arrival of the mail with mixed feelings. It was due the next day, and Alfred Halton was going to leave Key Island by it, for there was peace in Hashish Valley and China Town, and the natives of Port Victoria were dully quiet, almost as if the burning of the crops had been a salutary lesson and had cowed them. There had been very little drunkenness in the streets of late—always the prevailing sin of Key Island—and thefts of cattle had been rare. So far things were well, and the removal of Halton would be an unfeigned relief, for Mrs. Lewin had an intuitive dread of him that all the rest of the population could not inspire. She had warned Gregory, who would hardly be warned because of an instinctive contempt at the roots of his nature for the man who had always been afraid to act; but the boat that took Alfred Halton out of her immediate life was as welcome as a human rescuer, if it had not also brought the mail. Mrs. Lewin dreaded the mail, and the sight of her husband's familiar handwriting. It would force her to face her own intention again, to consider their relations, and how she should deliberately sever herself from him. While he was absent there had been a certain pause in action that had left her finally uncommitted. She did not mean to flinch from the actual step, and yet she wished that his return might be delayed.

She had not expected the Administrator that night, for he had been to Port Albert, and she had not heard of his return. His visits were almost

always made in the evening after dinner, when he could snatch a half-hour unobserved and likely to be undisturbed, and his appearance on this occasion was later than his usual hour. There was something hurried and almost abrupt about his entrance too, partly from the fact that he was in riding dress, and it seemed as if he must have come straight from his return journey.

She had risen rather hastily as Abdallah announced him, and instinctively looked past his broad shoulders to see the white turban vanish out of sight before she greeted him. But he hardly waited for safety, and drew her into his arms with an usual demonstration of passion. They stood silent for a moment, and she was suddenly a little faint. Either some desperate feeling in him communicated itself to her, or the violent demand of his nature sapped her strength. She had not the resistance to draw her lips away, but it was a relief when the interminable kiss was over. She gave an odd little laugh to recover herself, and laid her hand against his face with tender familiarity.

"You haven't shaved to-day! How dare you kiss me?"

"I know—I'm only just back. I came straight in."

"Haven't you been home?" she asked, startled. "Haven't you dined?"

"Yes!"—something seemed to strangle him in the one word. "Yes—I—went home. No, don't call any one. I'm going back to Government House to feed—later."

"But, Evelyn"—her arms suddenly tightened about his large loose figure; she looked up with a beautiful white face—"have you bad news?"

"No!"—he spoke the one word with no uncertainty, but then he framed her face in his two hands

and looked hard into her eyes. "Do you know," he said fiercely, "I am tempted to break my word to you!"

"How?"—but she knew in all her leaping blood.

"To make you rather more mine than I have a right too yet, to-night." For a minute it seemed that his decision hung in the balance, while she wondered blankly why her will seemed frozen, and she could not say at once, as she must do, "I will not!"

"If I let you off, promise me afresh to come to me some day—when we are free," he said urgently, the assurance of his first words startling her. "You will not throw me over for some woman's scruple—will you?"

Such uncertainty was even more unusual than his taking her consent for granted, for he was anxious now, pleading for what he had already gained, as if there were some real fear of losing it.

"Evelyn, there is something troubling you!" she exclaimed. "There *is* something wrong!"

"No, nothing—but say what I want. Promise me ——"

"What?"

"That you are mine whatever happens. That nothing shall stand between us."

She hesitated, panic-stricken. All the responsibility of such selfishness as he asked for weighed upon her with a sudden burden.

"We have decided ——" she began.

"No, but swear it ——"

Then his mood changed as strangely as it appeared to have come upon him. He clasped her waist with his arm again, and dropped his head heavily against her breast. She almost staggered under his massive weight, even though he held her.

"No, I will ask nothing of you," he said thickly. "I will trust you to give me more than I deserve, Leo—but you are free to choose. I am too hardened a sinner for you to be bound to, or smirch yourself with, perhaps. And yet—I love you—love you!"

The cry was so genuine that it frightened her for their safety, and she said "Hush" instinctively. His face when he raised it was lined and scarred as if with his own storm of feeling, and he looked harsher-featured and more rugged than ever. Even after he had regained his usual control and left her, she kept going over the incident with a feeling of bewilderment. It was the only occasion on which she had seen him so upset, and he appeared to her almost wild—almost as if possessed by some unlooked-for remorse. She could but suppose that their mutual relations stung his sense of honour, too, at times, though it was a venial sin, but such a revelation was almost pitiful to her, and, strange to say, strengthened her own resolution to sacrifice the rest of the world to him, as no appeal of his could have done. Even the momentary danger she had been in of a sexual advance in their relations with each other did not alarm her as it had at the time. She realised that the danger had been there, for Gregory's force of will had at times almost a hypnotic influence upon her, and where she would once have been confident in her own power of denial, she had learned to doubt herself; but she realised also that it was no mere access of passion and self-indulgence that had made him desire a more complete possession of her. For some reason he was afraid of a possible break in the tie that bound them, and wished to strengthen it by every means in his power. He judged that, once master of her body, her morality would be uneasy until he had an established

right to such privilege, and by foregoing that claim he had weakened his own position with her. But why should he doubt her resolution now, and why be so suddenly anxious to secure her even to the extent of compromising her honour?

The question troubled her waking thoughts, and followed her even into her dreams. But she found no answer to her own vague disquietude, and the darker knowledge in Gregory's mind was hidden from her.

"Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle . . . that he may be smitten, and die.

"And it came to pass, when Joab observed the city, that he assigned Uriah unto a place where he knew that valiant men were.

"And the men of the city went out and fought with Joab; and there fell some of the people of the servants of David; and Uriah the Hittite died also."

For, as Gregory had said, he had been home before he came on to the bungalow, and there he found that during his absence in Port Albert news had arrived, and awaited him.

There had been a cable from Capetown.

CHAPTER XVI

"Quos Deus vult perdere, dement at prius!"—*Latin Proverb.*

THE Post Office at Port Victoria is in the same block of buildings as the Government Office, though on a lower floor, and the busy staircase is thronged by officials as well as people coming for their mail or posting letters. There is no delivery in Port Victoria, for two excellent reasons—local communication is carried on solely through the telephone, or notes by bearer, and on mail days the recipients of letters besiege the office for their mail, long before the sorting is over. Most of the residents have a box, and prefer to call for their letters to having them delivered, so the postman's duties are a farce, and by the time he goes his rounds he has no letters to carry.

Bristow Nugent rode into town early that mail day, but he had business at the A.S.C. yard, and at the garrison office, and by the time he reached the Post Office it was one o'clock, and his letters had been waiting for him in the box for two hours. At the foot of the rough staircase were a group of men he knew—Arthur White, Archie Lysle the regimental chaplain, the harbour master, Hamilton Gurney, and young Rennie—and before he had spoken a word to them their concerned faces had told him that something was wrong. Although knowing that his private affairs could not have reached them before himself, his heart contracted with the sick throb of fear peculiar to men stationed in distant corners of the earth, and feeling them-

selves helplessly out of reach of their nearest and dearest, and the good-looking animal face under the white helmet suddenly blanched.

"What's up?" he said characteristically.

"It's Lewin ——" the Attorney-General answered as briefly and to the point as he was asked. "They cabled from Capetown last night, and the details are in to-day."

"Lewin!—Ally!—what about him?"

"He's dead!"

Nugent caught at the wooden banister as if White had struck him, and turned sharply from one to the other with the words he could not utter on his lips. They answered his questions amongst themselves without his asking them.

"He made a mess of things over the East African business, and—and cleared out of it." Young Rennie spoke first, but shied off the explanation like a frightened horse. There was some darker meaning here than the natural fate which overtakes any man. Nugent's face grew sharper with anxiety.

"Poor young fool!" said White. "He was the wrong man in the wrong place. Fell in with his own regiment too, and made a night of it—got drunk most likely, and talked."

"Talked Government secrets too—*Gregory's* secrets! There will be a devil of a row to hush up now. Gregory may have to go himself."

"Serve him right!" put in the little Chaplain with unexpected savagery. "What did he want sending a harmless fool like Ally into such a tight place? It was Halton's job."

"Lewin went away like a sick beast, poor devil, somewhere into the interior." It was Arthur White who seemed to know by instinct the raging questions Nugent could not frame, and answer them with

more coherence than the rest. "That was how it was they never found him for so long, and the news was delayed. It only came down to Capetown a few days since, and the mail picked up Hanney's letter at Beira."

"How did he die?" Brissy had found his voice at last. The curt words surprised himself that they should be in his ordinary tone. He had fancied, with his throat dry and burning like that, that he must be hoarse. "Was it fever or a scrimmage?"

There was a brief pause, and the men looked at each other.

"Neither," said White, without glancing at the questioner. "He shot himself."

"Funked it, by Jove!" The words came under Brissy's breath. He did not know what it was that shocked him—the suggestion of cowardice to his mind, or the staggering realisation of the extent of Alaric Lewin's indiscretion to have driven him to such a course. It must indeed have been a disaster that had made Ally see no way out of it, but to take his own life. What, in God's name, had he been doing?

"Does his wife know?" he said roughly, in his fear.

"Poor girl!—no, how should she?"

"Some one must tell her. It will leak out, and she'll hear it straight, if they don't."

"I pity the man who breaks it to her, that's all!" It was Rennie who spoke, and his tones were heartfelt. "I wouldn't for anything the world contains!"

"Some one must." Brissy set his white teeth and looked from one to the other. There was no response in their faces, and their eyes avoided his rather than otherwise. In the pause a heavy step sounded on the landing above, and the Administra-

tor himself appeared, leaning over the rail of the stair. His gaunt form and harsh face showed not one sign of weakness—hardly even of pity or concern—but he signed imperiously to Arthur White.

"Can you come up and speak with me?" he said. "I want you."

As if by a common impulse all the men turned and followed the Attorney-General up the stair, and crowded into the narrow passage, looking with stern earnestness into Gregory's face. He held some letters in his hand, and beyond him, through the open door of the office he had just left, Alfred Halton's figure was just visible, seated by the open window. It was so hot at this hour of the day—being barely past the Miroro—and in the narrow passage between the offices, that the sweat hung in beads round the lips and on the temples of every man present, without any movement or exertion on their part, while the smell of the air seemed the essence of heat—a baked atmosphere, without actual matter to flavour it.

"We were speaking of Mrs. Lewin, sir," said the Attorney-General firmly. "Does she know of Captain Lewin's death?"

"Not unless some one has already ridden out and told her, or she is in town."

"She isn't in town, I think, because her groom came down at eleven and took out her mail."

"She could not have heard through the mail, I suppose?" said the Administrator quickly. "No, of course not—there was nothing but the cable from Capetown. My information came from Beira, and Mrs. Lewin would not hear from there."

"They do not know any details at Capetown then?"

"No. Some one will have to break it to Mrs. Lewin."

Again that reluctant pause, while each man in his own mind saw Chum as she had appeared to him at some moment when she made the most vivid picture of herself to him individually. So, Rennie saw her on horseback, managing a fractious pony—Arthur White recalled one evening when he had seen her with his wife in the nursery, bending over a child's cot. Hamilton Gurney fancied her in her own pretty shaded room, lying back against some coloured cushions, while he sang to her,—but no man offered to face her with such news as that the Administrator held in the loose letters in his hand.

It was Bristow Nugent who spoke at last,—the least expected of the group.

"All right—I'm going."

He turned on his heel, as if he could not wait to think, and ran down the uncarpeted stairs, his spurs clicking and jingling, and some metal trapping or other adding to the audible hurry. Outside he caught his pony by the mane, swung into the saddle far quicker than he had ever done at a fourth chucker on the Polo ground, and was tearing past the stores and out towards Maitso Hill before any one on the landing had quite realised that it was Captain Nugent who had risen to the occasion.

"Bristles has no nerves," said Rennie in selfish excuse. "He was about the best man to go—he won't really care much. He's stolid."

"Pity you're so sensitive," retorted the Chaplain cuttingly. "A little of Nugent's stolidity might do you good. . . . Lewin was his friend, too!"

Such a thought was in Bristow Nugent's mind all through that dusty gallop up the tangled green road, while the sweat poured down his brown face, and his heart beat thickly with his errand. Memories

of Ally—old Ally Sloper!—at Sandhurst with him, when they both came perilously near being "chucked" because of a certain escapade connected with a frying-pan and the senior captain's banjo; —that night too, when Forrester of the Duke's (Forrester always did lay it on so thick!) borrowed his man's uniform and went out with Ally as his "girl," Ally in a hat and feathers after the style of a London flower-seller! Lucky thing they were not spotted that time. And his own special breed of fox-terriers from which Ally had that bitch he was so fond of—what was her name? Kiddy—yes, of course, after some girl on whom he was awfully gone. Kiddy went to India with Ally, and he confessed that he cried like a fool when she died from a karait's bite. He could understand that too—a fellow got as fond of a dog as of a child. He thought inconsistently of his own boy in England, and wondered how he should feel if his unopened letters contained bad news. Then his thoughts harked back to Sandhurst—poor old Ally! . . . Such stupid, lovable times! . . . Men make tenderer friendships in their young manhood than they care to express.

He was covered with dust—caked with it—and streaked with the heat as he dismounted in the stable yard of the bungalow. Not the state in which to go into a lady's drawing-room, he thought ruefully, pulling the handkerchief out of his sleeve to wipe his shining face! The hair clung to his damp forehead as he slipped off his helmet and dropped it with a little clang of the chain, on to the table in the hall. Mrs. Lewin was in the further room, Abdallah said—oh, yes, she was at home to visitors. Brissy tried instinctively to muffle his spurs as he walked across the bare boards, through the hanging curtains, and into her white presence.

She was sitting by the window, looking out through an open door to the hot riot of the hillside, where the wind sang in the grasses and came back laden with sweetness from the flowering trees, but she turned her head sharply at the sound of his ringing step (why did those spurs jar so?) and rose and met him. The instant he got close to her he saw that she knew, though how he did not stop to puzzle out, and with the tears running down his scorched face he took her hands in his and tried to speak.

"This is kind of you, Brissy," she said in a quick, low voice, looking up into the eyes she had called soulless. The first thing she had realised was that he had made the simple self-sacrifice from which other men had flinched, and come to tell her as he best could, with less self-consciousness than they, but suffering far more from a personal feeling. Another of her theories fell from her while he stood there holding her hands, and with a bewildered humiliation she felt that she would never judge any one again. For this man of all the Station she had always held a little in contempt.

"I had a letter by the mail," she said, quite quietly and collectedly, but as if a little weary. "He sent it by a runner, just before—he . . . And the man got through in time to deliver it and catch the mail—almost before any one knew. Mustn't it have been a wonderful journey? All down through the German territory, and by Lake Nyassa into Rhodesia, I suppose. But he was a Malagasy—Ally's own servant, Longa—and they are marvellous runners. You know Longa means *friend* in the vernacular—strange, isn't it?"

She paused, as if she were thinking, and put her hand up to her hair as if a little uncertain that it lay in its usual correct masses. He only said brokenly,

"Poor old Ally!—he backed out,"—that seemed to trouble Brissy!—"I wish I had been there."

"You would never have done it,"—she shook her head with a flash of intuition. "You were stronger than he." She thought a moment, and then went on in the same curious fashion. "Yes, Longa (and that means a friend!) brought the letter to Cape-town, and sent it on to me by the mail. Here it is—oh yes! do look at it!"

She nearly thrust it into his hands, which trembled as they held it. He almost felt that he ought not to look, as his blurred eyes travelled over the blotted sheets.

Poor Ally! Poor, handsome, unreliable Ally—proved incompetent, and such a failure!

It was a disconnected letter at best, and nothing really but a confession of the man's shame, which had to be pieced together from a knowledge of him, for he had made no coherent statement. He had fallen in with his own regiment, who were camped just outside Port Cecil, and what with the reaction in getting out of Key Island, and "the fellows" being glad to welcome him—well, the result was the same as it had been when he failed before, and the Administrator wanted him on the night of the threatened rising. He did not remember very much. He was not dead drunk this time—if he had been it might have saved him—but after dining with the regiment (and God knows what he had said to them, only they were decent fellows and would shield him), and he had had an important interview with the men most involved in the insurrection. It was a private interview, and a diplomatic affair that was to be kept very dark. Melton Hanney arranged it, he had been most decent all through—there was no blame attached to him. He had settled with Ally as to when the meeting should take place, but had

not been present at the interview. There was an argument—Ally did not remember the details very well—only his head was heated, and he got impatient, and lost his temper and threatened. The men saw his condition and drew him on—then he bragged of his Government, and their powers; and then—then—all that Gregory had explained to him so carefully lest he should make mistakes, was blurted out, and the very nation perhaps involved by his folly. He knew what he had done almost before they left him with smooth, guarded speeches, though no hint of animosity, and a kind of sullen despair settled down on him. That was three days ago, before his letter was written—three days of agonising suspense, and time to think over what he had done. Nothing was known as yet; he was supposed to be communicating with his chiefs, or forming an ultimatum. In the meantime he had arranged for a shooting excursion inland—and there was more truth in it than would appear! It seemed the only thing to do—but he must write the truth to Hanney. It was not Hanney's fault, and it might leave him a chance to do something, and avert disaster.

"He is a thoroughly capable man, and knows the whole situation—in my opinion, if that goes for anything now, he ought to have managed it from the first," wrote Alaric Lewin a few hours before death. "Why did they send me? You said I could not do it—you were right as usual. I'm no good, Chum—you always wanted me to do something, but you would never have made me. I'm better out of it—it's the least I can do, for I should only disgrace you if I lived. You don't know what I've done this time—it was a big thing, bigger than you all imagine, and I've hashed it. I only trust I shan't get Gregory into the mess with me. It is not his fault

any more than Hanney's. The Home Government ought to leave it to the man on the spot, or be sure who they send. And there have been worse things in my life that concern you, that I can't tell you either. They involve others. Only forgive us, and believe that I'm doing the best thing possible for you now. Good-bye, Chum—and God bless you!"

It was signed with his full name, but the letters were more scrawled than usual, and the whole letter was blotted and uncertain. The suspicion that hurt Brissy more than all was what the trembling handwriting betrayed—the man had been so afraid of the thing he was going to do! He had not wanted to die. Only his desperation and the stress of circumstances in which he found himself had driven him to a last bold action—forced him, morally at least, to go down with his back against the wall.

For the idea of cowardice had faded out of Captain Nugent's mind. He saw from that piteous, confused letter of the man who had hardly understood his own disaster, that what might have been weakness in himself was a kind of furious bravery in Ally. With an unusual stretch of imagination, he fancied the beautiful set face, the splendidly-built figure in the lonely place in which his friend had chosen to die, and heard the crash of the revolver. Curiously enough he knew Ally's revolvers; they were a pair he had given him himself. That they should come to such a use as this!

Mrs. Lewin had been standing beside him patiently while he read the letter. She made no comment, and asked no question as he handed back the sheets, but with a curious new speculation in her face she turned upon him suddenly.

"They know—at Government House?"

"Yes, there was a cable, and a letter followed by the mail from Beira."

"When did the cable come?"

Brissy hesitated. "This morning, I suppose. I did not hear."

"You are wrong," she said quietly. "It came last night."

The conviction was so strong in her mind that it seemed to revolutionise her thoughts. Gregory had certainly known last night, it accounted for his disturbed manner and his sudden appearance. But why had he not prepared her at least? Why had he thought that when she knew it would prove a barrier between them—unless he had expected this beforehand, calculated upon it, plotted some such solution of the problem that had threatened to keep them apart! The dreadful suspicion was so intolerable that she began to fancy she was going mad. She could not think consecutively—she could not reason, or judge with mercy. She seemed to have lost her power to be charitable, and almost to think of him as a deliberate murderer. For the time all other feeling was dead in her, stunned with the shock, and her one dread was that she might have to see him or speak to him. Her last night's self seemed as far removed from herself of to-day as though they were two separate beings. She could not remember even her love for him; there seemed only the dull pain of it left.

When Mrs. Gilderoy came in later to see her, she found her lying on her own bed in a kind of stupour; yet the instant she spoke to her Leoline's brain responded, and she answered with perfect coherence—it was only her feeling that was numb. She had even settled her plans too, and knew what she meant to do.

"I cannot leave in this mail boat. I must wait to see if there are more details to be got, and to arrange things also. There is business to settle here

that could not be done by to-morrow, and much to go into."

"What will you do then? You will not remain here?"

"I shall go to Vohitra as soon as I have packed up our things and left this house ready for—for the next people. I want you to stay here with me for the few days if you will."

"I'll go with you to Vohitra too, if my good man can spare me. Or if I can't actually start with you (of course you'll want to get away as soon as ever you can) I'll follow you."

"I shall stay here until the next mail," said Leoline levelly. "I have no black clothes of course—is there a sewing woman in the town who could make me something?"

"Yes, a very decent little woman too for such a place. I will see about that for you. You won't go out, I suppose?"

"No."

"She can come up to you. Oh, I am the bearer of a message from Mr. Gregory himself. His sincere ——"

"Don't!" said Leoline sharply. For a moment her calm seemed broken through. She put her hands over her horror-stricken eyes as if she saw something that Mrs. Gilderoy could not see. "The Administrator was the man who appointed Captain Lewin to East Africa," she continued in a low voice. "You can understand how I feel. Of course it is unreasonable."

"But natural at the moment. I quite understand. Under the circumstances you would rather not see him?"

"He has not asked to see me, surely!"

"No, but a visit of condolence is almost inevitable. I will see that he does not come. If he

wants to express his sympathy he can lend you his yacht to take you round to Port Albert. That is a much more practical and sensible thing to do."

But Mrs. Lewin did not answer. She lay with closed eyes, not bearing, but enduring, until thought was kind to her, and instead of the nightmare of her new suspicions, or the recollection of that blotted letter, she remembered the revelation of Bristow Nugent—poor Brissy, who had come to her with the tears running down his face, and whom she had always good-humouredly despised as too coarsely moulded for fine feeling. Truly, our God creates strange and hidden beauties in the vessels which He makes of clay. And who shall know His mind as to which were fashioned to honour and which to dishonour?

* * * * * *

Two days later the mail went out, and carried Alfred Halton through the Gates, out of prison back to England. Half Port Victoria, still talking of "poor Lewin's death," came down to the wharf to see him off, and the Administrator came also. Hardly a word had passed between the two men on the subject in everybody's mouth beyond what was necessary, but before they said good-bye Halton expressed an official regret over the gravity of the situation in Port Cecil, and his eyes, meeting Gregory's, declared war.

"I have already stated my opinion that Lewin was the wrong man to send," he said quietly, "I can only wish you well out of the unfortunate complication!" The small man was turning to bay at last.

"The Colonial Office will not hold you responsible, at any rate," said Gregory with his insolent

lidless stare. "My course of action was entirely my own."

"And any disaster that followed."

"Melton Hanney is at Port Cecil," said Gregory with a shrug of his shoulders. "If one cannot trust the man in place one may as well throw up the sponge. I do not suppose that Lewin's indiscretions will lead to international trouble, but if they did—it means a certain expenditure of men and money," he ended composedly.

Halton turned his face slowly to the man who was his better by just the larger qualities that made him without fear, and it was ugly to see. As the Administrator put his foot on the gang-plank to leave the ship, his fellow in office spoke softly, barbed words that were intended for, and reached no other ears.

"'Some of the King's servants be dead,'" he quoted slowly, "'and thy servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also!'" It was the last that passed between them.

CHAPTER XVII

"He needs a clever counsel who stands at the world's tribunal."
—*English Proverb.*

MRS. LEWIN had not seen Diana Churton, save at passing moments, for a period of some weeks, but she encountered her on the day she started for Vohitra. Diana had called in company with other women in the Station, during the time following Ally's departure; but Leoline had always looked upon her as her husband's friend, and did not expect, or desire, an equal attention to herself. Diana's scanty visits had not impressed her in any way, and her own absorption during those drifting, golden weeks blinded her usual observation. It struck her with a positive shock that Mrs. Churton had aged when she came face to face with her in the morning sunlight on the quay; but the knowledge even then lay dormant in her mind, not to be considered upon until some day she might have need of it.

The Administrator had placed his yacht at her disposal, and she made use of it in preference to the coasting steamer, which otherwise was the only means of transport to Port Albert. The yacht was a fussy, old-fashioned little steamboat in itself, prone to kick in the deep current that washed the east coast of the island; but at least she did not smell of oil, and she had passenger accommodation, while the coasting steamers had none save the dirty deck, which was crowded with fruit and coloured people in about equal proportions. Mrs. Lewin accepted

the hospitality of the *Hova*, and found herself the only passenger.

Liscarton came also, to his deep disgust and the degradation of his dignity. He had been Captain Nugent's last gift to Leoline, who accepted him with a faint smile at the remembrance of Mrs. Gilderoy's comments on the significance of a pony in Key'land. Brissy left by the mail that also took Halton out of the Rat-trap. He came up to the bungalow to say good-bye, and sat looking desperate for twenty minutes, while Mrs. Lewin unconsciously made him more unhappy by loving him across the room with her speaking eyes. He had so often bored her by lingering at her tea-table that she felt her reluctance to let him go on this occasion a judgment upon her, and was always a little ashamed in her after life to remember that she had very nearly kissed him. Fortunately for his peace of mind, Captain Bristow Nugent thought his chance of heaven no more remote than such a privilege.

It was in turning round to watch Liscarton's vagaries in embarking that Leoline Lewin saw another pony being led off by a groom, and a dust-coloured habit that she knew advancing on her. Beneath the white helmet Diana's face seemed to have fallen in and grown pinched; her hard-burnt colour had faded somewhat, and her eyes were the eyes of an uncertain beast—some wild thing in captivity that awaits a chance to bite its keeper through, all its habit of obedience. Her loud voice was alone unchanged. It greeted Mrs. Lewin with the same bluff comradeship she adopted in her feminine friendships.

"So you're off to Vohitra! Best thing you could do. I wish I could get up there too."

"I hoped you might come up later, perhaps,"

said Mrs. Lewin as they shook hands. It struck her as hopelessly indecent that she should stand here on the quay chatting after Key'land fashion, when she had only had news of her husband's death about a week since. But the conventionalities of tradition seemed squeezed out by the narrow limits of life in the tiny Station. For a day or so she might shut herself out from public view behind drawn shutters, but the instant she appeared in the open air an encounter was unavoidable; and why should she turn her back upon friends because her husband was dead? she thought blankly. After all, life had to go on. She was dully surprised to find herself talking much the same as usual, of the narrow round of intimacy, of the people she knew, of monotonous, local interests. "Mrs. Gilderoy joins me on Thursday," she found herself saying, as if it were an ordinary summer outing. "Won't you come too?"

"Can't, unfortunately. Bute came back this week."

"He has been for quite a long shoot, hasn't he? Ah, he rode round the island—I forgot." Again Mrs. Gilderoy occurred to her mind, and a dull speculation crossed it as to whether she were right, and Diana's face bore testimony to a domestic tragedy.

"Yes, he wanted a change," Mrs. Churton said naturally, and in so composed a manner it dispelled the idea of anything being wrong. "He was awfully seedy before he went. This place doesn't suit him. But it doesn't suit any one long. How are you?"

"I don't know," said Leoline simply. "What does it matter? One just goes on living. Tell me the news of the place."

"There is none. The Clayton woman has taken

a religious craze, Rennie tells me. He can't stand her any longer, so he'll probably revert to Trixie Denver. There's nothing else to amuse him until he gets transferred. You go home next mail, I suppose? How I envy you!" She drew a long rasping breath that seemed to hurt her.

"I would have been contented to stop here if I could have kept as I was," said Mrs. Lewin bitterly, for the shock that her life had sustained had driven her back on a former mental attitude. She felt at the moment that if she could wipe out the horror of her suspicion about Gregory, she would be content to live out her life with Alaric Lewin and all his weakness and failure. She glanced down at her long slim figure in its new black, and Mrs. Churton's eyes followed her own.

"Mourning is awfully hot," she said simply. "You can wear white if you like at Vohitra—there will be no one to see, I don't see that it matters—when one feels much, clothes seem so insignificant a proof, don't they?" Her sharpened face took a strained hurt look that made it pathetic.

"Oh, what do I care!" said Chum, impatient of her own pain and remorse, missing all hint of the others. "One cannot lose one's instincts of course, but I would wear sackcloth—with a cut," she added honestly.

They parted there on the quay, unconscious of the bitterness in each other's hearts, Diana to go back to the house that held a grim tragedy for her in her husband's face—Leoline to take ship and flee from herself, if such a miracle had been permitted. She could not get away, any more than Bute Churton and his wife could get away from the degradation of that every-day life in which he had always a memory to shame him, she one that had driven the iron into her soul. She had never given

him a chance to ask her pardon. It was the one revenge left her, for she knew that he could not rest in the sense of his own lost self-esteem. He was trying to speak of it, and she would not let him. Sometimes she watched the big man moving about uneasily, with hard brown eyes that hated him, and knew that his mind was troubled, until she would have liked to have mocked him. She grew cruel in those days, for the grinding intimacy of their narrow life prevented either of them gaining a long enough respite to think, and learn patience apart. Truly Key Island was a trap!

It looked so in reality to Mrs. Lewin from the deck of the yacht, as she was carried out of harbour. Once more her eyes rested on the green circle of Maitso and Mitsinjovy cuddling the bay. She looked back at the little palm-ridden place, and the ravenalas lifted solemn hands in blessing on the shore even as she passed through the gates and out to the open channel. For a minute Leoline breathed more freely as the heat of the harbour was replaced by a warm sea wind, but she had not got rid of Key Island even yet. The yacht hugged the coast, and the lovely shore was flashed on her line of vision as she lay in her deck-chair and looked idly at her surroundings. Maitso Hill faded round a point, and the deep water enabled them to pass closely to the warm green slopes that seemed to hang right down over the water. Some way inland, among the desolate native villages of the Company's day, a brotherhood of priests had settled themselves, with the fervour of their Order for conversion of the hopelessly intermingled black races. The Domicile was not visible from the coast, but with a very lovely expression of their religion they had set up here and there a white cross in the dense green vegetation. They did not mark either grave or

shrine—they were simply placed there for the love of the symbol, and the sudden pure white thing uplifting its pathetic memory against the riotous growth of the cliff, brought the relief of unhoped-for tears to Leoline's eyes. There seemed something infinitely gracious in this memory of God set up for chance passers-by—a gleaming, plain white cross, standing out in strong relief against the wild green, clinging as it were to the very edge of the land, above the sea. For so the priests of Notre Seigneur have set them up on the East coast of Key Island, like a beacon.

By and by the yacht passed a point of land where the Captain pointed out an old battered gun, still thrusting up a helpless muzzle through the guava and logwood which had triumphantly woven it a grave. He gave Mrs. Lewin a telescope to make it out, and she wished she had not looked—its futile mouth, agape through the green, seemed like a discarded servant whom man had ungratefully forgotten and left to rot among the forces of Nature.

"In the time of the Company they fortified all this coast, because of the French cruisers," said the Captain, in explanation. "You will find all the Madagascan side of the island ready to fight—but we expect peace from our African neighbours."

"Besides, the sand-banks are a safeguard against any enemy," said Mrs. Lewin dryly. "And Africa Point is hardly the kind of coast on which to effect a landing! What is the name of this Point where the poor old gun stands?"

"Tifiro—it means, briefly, shoot! Not that they could have done much execution with that old thing. It's about as much use as the guns that the Government give to our Volunteers at home! The Company themselves removed their fortifications to Port Albert during the last few years of their reign

in Key Island, and since it became a Government affair they have been added to and improved."

Another long luxuriance of coast brought them into harbour again; but the little town of Port Albert looked a mere village after the important coaling-station of Port Victoria, and the vaunted fortifications seemed in a very unfinished condition. There was a landing-jetty, but more for the convenience of shipping the sugar than for the accommodation of passengers or general cargo. It looked like a native settlement at first sight, all the huts raised on their four little feet above the ground, and the cluster of thatched roofs suggesting China Town over again. As it happened, Leoline had never been to Port Albert before, and had imagined it a much larger place. She stood forlornly among her baggage as it was placed on the jetty, the servants who had accompanied her huddling round with the thrust-out lower lip of native disapproval.

The Administrator's yacht had attracted some attention, and a staring group of coloured people were pushed aside by a tall burnt man in the universal riding-breeches and linen coat, who came forward and lifted a broad hat to Mrs. Lewin.

"I am Mr. Ambroise, the Town Warden," he explained in the pleasant free manner that men gain in such small corners of the Empire, where they feel their nation all one big family. "Mr. Gregory sent me word that a lady would put up at my house for a night on the way up to Vohitra. Are you Mrs. Lewin?"

"Yes. But I don't like to trouble you to turn out!"

"Oh, it's all right. I always go to the hotel when any one comes up, and leave them my place. Mosquitoes don't hurt me for the night, you see, and the hotel is—well, rather impossible for ladies!"

"I know, I've tried the Natale!"

"At Port Victoria? It's a palace compared to this, I assure you!" He laughed his pleasant, unrestrained laugh, as if his lungs had never been cramped. Then, glancing at her black gown, the eyes under the broad hat grew graver and a little pitiful. Mrs. Lewin looked unintentionally girlish and appealing in the simplicity of the clothes which were all that the native dressmaker could accomplish. But because she was herself it seemed bound to fit her, and the beauty of her figure was quite as obvious under their plain folds as in her more elaborate gowns. Mr. Ambroise thought with honest sympathy of the poor fellow who had made such a hash of things in East Africa, and looked into Mrs. Lewin's eyes with a little sense of awe. Like every one else, he could never tell their exact colour; he only knew that they were most wonderful, and held a tragedy.

"Is this all your baggage—and your servants?" he said, looking round him at her property, which seemed to her rather overwhelming on the elementary jetty. "Everything you have?"

"Except my pony. They are disembarking him now—with some difficulty," said Leoline drily.

Liscarton had a character of his own, and was showing it. He might have been a member of Parliament in some former state of existence from his tendency to argue. When he had done his best to demolish the jetty with his hoofs, and had scattered the crowd to the safety of the beach, he consented to walk quietly into the little town, his ears laid back among his ragged mane, and the whites of his eyes showing wickedly.

"I have no cart, and it is only half-a-mile—will you walk?" said Ambroise simply. "You won't get on that brute, will you?"

"I think he would behave better if I rode him,"

said Mrs. Lewin. "It does not matter about a habit—I can ride in this skirt."

It seemed to her a strange procession through the dirty little streets—herself mounted, by gracious permission of Liscarton, Ambroise walking at the pony's shoulder, the servants behind, and half-a-dozen natives following with the boxes. The men here she noticed, with the knowledge gained in six months, were more Malagasy than Negro—a much finer race, brown-skinned and blue-eyed, with flattened slender limbs and features, which had the pensive dignity of the Hindoo. Ambroise's servants were of the same tribe, from Anossi, and waited on her that night with strange words that she did not recognise, even from the Patois—*Inona izao?* for What do you wish? and *Salama* for greeting. The night was intensely hot—far hotter than any she had spent in the bungalow—and she was not sorry to rise at four next morning to ride out to Vohitra. At all events it was in the hills, and would be cooler than this low-lying, crowded little town.

"I sent up some supplies," Ambroise said, as he marshalled the little procession, and mounted his own pony—he was going to ride out with them some way, and show them the road—"and my butler is up there waiting for you. I hope you'll find everything in order. I have sent plenty of tinned things, as it's difficult to get them out sometimes, and you might run short."

"It is most kind of you to take all this trouble. Mrs. Gilderoy did not warn me that I should be so helpless on other people's bounty."

"She took it all for granted, most likely. They always stay with me when they go out to Vohitra, and I send up and open the place for them beforehand."

"You know the Gilderoys?"

"Oh yes. She's a clever woman. He's rather too caustic for my taste. It's like an overdose of quinine to talk to him for long!"

"Do you often have visitors?"

"Only during the summer as a rule. But it's always summer, more or less, isn't it? The temperature does not alter much. My most frequent guest is Mr. Gregory. He is round about once a fortnight, and since he has been Administrator the accommodation has had to be looked to, owing to his fashion of visiting every part of his little domain at a minute's notice. Not that he would mind if one gave him a Karross and the bare ground; but his unexpected appearances have had a salutary effect on the police stations, at which one generally has to stay in a native village."

Leoline was silent, while a sudden fear gripped her heart. Even here she was not safe from him, it seemed. She had come away from Port Victoria with some idea of leaving it all behind her—the horror and the pain; she had forgotten his constant visits to Port Albert as well as China Town, and the native settlements on the Tableland. She felt the confinement of the island again, which, for a time, she had lost in the distraction of seeing its further extent. It was no less a trap because the rats ran round it in their desire to escape.

After a time they left Port Albert behind them, and were out in the Tsara Valley—the great centre of the sugar-growing industry in Key Island. They were leaving the river, and crossing the wide fields to their right, the ponies going single file to keep the narrow paths which were all the greedy Planters allowed through their rich plantations, save the lines of rail for the trucks. As the valley opened before

them, Leoline felt blinded by the cane. It spread on all sides, a sheet of liquid sunshine, from the bed of the Volofatsy River, which cut it in two, up even to the hillsides, clear gold-green, waving with every breath of wind that crossed it, a sight to see once and remember always. The valley was clothed with it, and the dark sides of the mountains, that shot up out of its reach, seemed only to throw it into greater prominence.

"It's a fine crop," Ambroise said, drawing rein and looking round him. "And nearly ripe. You'll see the sugar industry in its glory, Mrs. Lewin. They will begin cutting next week."

"Where is the factory?"

"Behind us, but the other side of the river. I must say good-bye to you here. There's your road, that track up the mountain side. Good-bye! Please send out to me if you want anything."

He rode off in the increasing day, and Leoline went on her lonely way, the coloured people closing in behind her. She could not miss her road for there was but one, though it wound in and out what looked like unbroken forest from the valley. High up on the hillside hung Vohitra, a long building with the inevitable stoep and an old tiled roof. It looked nothing but a toy thing, like a Swiss châlet, against the massed woods of the mountain crest, but below it in the hollow the vegetation was less severe. There was a grove of bananas tossed down the very slope where the house rested, and below this again the plaintive tone of bamboo—not the insistent liquid sunshine of the cane that filled the valley, but the hesitating green that is pale and golden and infinitely soft by reason of the feathery mass of its foliage. Down the heart of the valley came the river, a shallow stream that sang loudly to the silent listening heavens and the kites, for there

seemed no one else to hear. Even Vohitra, with its hint of humanity, was infinitely lonely.

Breakfast was laid for her on the stoep, and Ambroise's butler, a tall comely Malagasy, bowed low before her with the murmured "Salama!" and asked her pleasure before he left the hill and returned to Port Albert. She looked at his picturesque figure in its deeply fringed *lamba*—the Malagasy at Port Victoria had in general discarded the native dress—and wished that she might have kept him in preference to Hafez, already grumbling among the calabashes. But she had no orders to give, save a pathetic request for a bath, and that, she learned, already awaited her.

She ate her breakfast in sight of the cane, which was beginning to assert its old influence upon her. There are two crops in Key Island; the one she had seen cut and crushed in Mr. Denver's factory was the lesser yield, but the Tsara Valley was now in its full glory. Her eyes strayed down the hillside to the rich harvest in the valley again and again, with a kind of fascination. It soothed her in some strange fashion to see the clear colour that always suggested spring and new life, and hope, even though the season was really autumn. Tsara—spring o' the year! The very name seemed to breathe the pure green of ripened sap, the rejuvenescence of Nature. The shock and jar of sudden death had come so near her of late, that she felt as if it had dinned her senses; now it hummed off into distance again, and life closed peacefully round her, leaving her time to think. . . .

She sauntered through the house after a while, and looked at the long rows of closed doors, for the bungalow was a large one and built to accommodate many visitors, being in a sense a government hotel for the use of sorely-tried officials. The rooms

were like loose boxes, and not much larger, but the heat was far less oppressive than in the lower portions of the island, and when the doors were fastened back the cool breeze that blew straight through the house, down the long corridor, made them bearable even at night. Mrs. Lewin's room was exactly like all the others, save that it possessed a key, which she had sternly demanded of Ambroise's butler. None of the other doors appeared to have any fastening beyond a rickety handle.

From the house itself she found the stable, and Liscarton, who received her with distrust as one who had lured him into the wilderness. Nor would he accept the sugar she offered, which for a pony who was always hungry was a proof of great offence. But sometimes he would sulk for days if his temper were upset. She pulled his head down in spite of his resentful manner, and kissed the white blaze between his wild eyes and the rough fringe on his forehead. Neither his mane nor tail had been cut, for he had never played polo, and it gave him an untamed appearance in contrast to other ponies. Mrs. Lewin hid the sugar in his manger in case he should change his mind, and went in search of the bath-room.

She discovered it at the end of a steep path which took her a hundred yards down the hillside. It was nothing but a rough wooden shed, with a zinc roof that did not touch the further wall by some inches. As Mrs. Lewin undressed she looked up and saw a slit of azure sky and the crowned head of a cocoanut palm that kept watch above her, but the palm had no appreciative eyes for a new version of Eve. The floor was just warm mother earth, for it had neither been flagged nor matted, and the bath itself was a deep zinc tub with a foot of dubious water in it. Leoline balanced daintily on the piece of board

which was all the carpeting allowed to save her from the gritty ground, and observed that the other furniture of the place consisted of an old cigarette-tin nailed to the wall for a soap dish, and a wooden peg on which the towels hung. It was not luxurious, but any means of washing is respected in Key Island, and she had learned humility in this respect. By the time she sauntered back to the bungalow it was nine o'clock, and the broad heat had begun.

One day was very like another at Vohitra; it seemed as if the hours had melted into each other, and the solitude and rest were healing her nature from the wrench it had sustained. She could think now, and face her own evolution. She did not read much, though she had brought a box of books with her. Curiously enough, it was none of these, but a little broken-backed *Rubaiyat* that she found on a dusty shelf at Vohitra that was her closest companion when she desired a book at all. It had probably been left behind by a former visitor, and it opened so invariably at one stanza that she never seemed to get any further —

> "Some for the riches of the world, and some
> Sigh for the Prophet's Paradise to come;
> Ah, take the cash, and let the credit go!
> Nor heed the rolling of a distant drum."

The volume used to lie open in her lap at this verse, while she looked so long at the cane, and thought of Gregory.

She could bear to think of him now, even though with a consciousness of her own responsibility she recognised that her intuitive fear had not been one to argue away—he had foreseen and looked for some such removing of the barrier between them, as had actually occurred. If she could, she would have screened him with the impression she had first had of his motive in appointing Alaric to the dif-

ficulty and danger of East Africa; she had thought that his words had a literal meaning when he said that he could not part from her, and that he had sent her husband away to indulge the momentary impulse, perhaps even to come to an understanding between them, and woo and win her. Anyhow, she had looked at it as an indefinite move, a respite from Ally's presence—no more. That would have been a woman's way—her own way, perhaps, but not Gregory's. The strong man looked further ahead, he had no motiveless actions. There was a darker object in Captain Lewin's appointment than a mere desire to be rid of him at the moment.

She seemed to have discovered this without effort on her part, as soon as she realised that he had known of Alaric's death the night before it was made public. He had been afraid of losing her—his own consciousness told him that he might, if she knew. Had he been innocent of this blood, the fear would not have struck him at all. She never masked the situation to herself any more, once she had faced it; this man that she loved had no scruples, he struck at what stood in his path, though it might be human life, and his career was a proof of such fearless murder. Well, the kings of the earth have succeeded so. But the marvel to her was that this knowledge of him had not killed her love. It had been numbed with the blow of her discovery of his pitfall for the man who stood in his way; but as the first horror passed off, as the mental life flowed back to her in the solitude of Vohitra, she realised that her heart had only been paralysed—the pain of returning feeling proved it alive through its very wounds. The last of her theories fell before the very anguish that cried out for him, the yearning of all her womanhood to his master touch. She had thought that she could not love save at a certain

standard; Evelyn Gregory could only reach that standard in one particular, that of ruthless strength, but the knowledge of his shortcomings, though it might appal her, did not make him one whit less dear to her.

The very pain of it seemed to have developed her into something alien, a character not her own. She had been so sure she knew herself, that the revelation of that in her which could overthrow her theories made her more patient and anxious to learn of her own fundamental nature. It was a new education, for she proved what is true of women in all ages—that love teaches them a sorrow so deep that they hide it in their secret consciousness, and swear they are happy. They never are happy, from the days of Eve and Adam until now; yet the woman does not exist, and never did exist, who, having been in love, would part with the experience. She would often willingly part with her after-memory of the man, and her disillusion; but with her own private emotions, and the glow and glory of which he was only the trivial cause, she would not part if God tried the experiment of offering her a miracle and showed her her past undone.

The few days of solitude before Mrs. Gilderoy joined her were invaluable to Leoline Lewin, for they gave her some sort of a real insight into herself. By the time Mrs. Gilderoy climbed the hill on her pony, bringing a breath of the stale life of Port Victoria with her, Mrs. Lewin could listen and pay a courteous attention without moral dislocation. Mrs. Gilderoy was both kind and shrewd; but the habit of many years will not be held in check by dormant good qualities, and she had used her quick wits on the social world around her until a smart saying became her second nature. It was irresistible to her to score off people, however much she

might like them, and sometimes the talent even surprised her into a lie.

"Is Major Churton back yet?" Leoline asked, as they sat at their first dinner together. "I saw Diana the day I left. She told me he was coming."

"He looks a good deal browner and older. I encountered him at the Denvers', lifting Trixie in and out of the hammock which she hangs up with that end in view. Some man has always got her in his arms. She likes them to paw her! Bute Churton goes there far too much."

"Di told me that Mrs. Clayton had taken to religion—has Miss Denver tasted conversion also?"

"No, but it's true about Eva Clayton. She talks about God as if He were an intimate acquaintance whose views she could always command on the telephone. And of course they always coincide With her own conduct! Wray wants to ask her if the Deity approves of ladies smoking! He hates her cigarettes, does my good man."

"God has come into fashion," said Mrs. Lewin rather bitterly. "At one time we kept our knowledge of Him to ourselves, as if ashamed of it, except in church, but now it is quite *chic* to drag Him into daily life. One almost gives His name as a reference—with one's banker's!"

"Yes, and so even the name has become cheapened."

"It is inconsistent of me perhaps," Mrs. Lewin confessed, "but I would rather hear a man use it as an oath and blaspheme that Name, than a woman turn it to account and use it for effect, even though half unconsciously."

"It is after all the worse blasphemy—and so common now-a-days. Sentimental people always fall back upon God as an excuse for their own self-indulgence."

Mrs. Lewin thought of the one sin that shall not be forgiven—the sin against the Holy Ghost, which is the sin of the spirit and worse than the sin of the letter. But she did not say so, being possessed of the grace of silence.

"The result of Eva's hypocrisy, however, has not been exactly satisfactory, from her point of view," laughed Mrs. Gilderoy. "The Rennie boy has defected, and now wanders about looking for a new pitfall. He wants to come out and see us, by the way. Is it too soon? Would you mind?"

"I do not mind," said Mrs. Lewin slowly, "in the sense of its being too soon after my husband's death. There is no real sooner or later in these things—it is merely a decent custom of civilisation which makes us pull down the blinds, and pretend to the world that we are weeping. Every one knows in their own minds that one cannot weep for more than a few hours at most. Why should I mind seeing visitors? Particularly in such a community as this! But I wish, if any one must come out, that it had been Mr. Gurney. Simply because I should like to hear him sing."

"Yes, he is always a voice with a man tacked on. Unfortunately he can't realise it though," said Mrs. Gilderoy drily. "If you asked him to come he would tell the whole Station. I think the Rennie boy is really safer, Chum."

Mrs. Lewin assented absently, and Mr. Rennie arrived in due course, and became an unconscious factor in spinning the web of her fate. She had made an effort in raising no objection to his presence, partly on Mrs. Gilderoy's account, for though that lady was good-natured enough to come out to Vohitra without the stimulant of a larger party, it must, as Leoline knew, be both dull and monotonous to her. The reward of her virtue was a new

revelation in the diagnosis she was making of her own self, and the touchstone nothing but the light words of a boy.

Mr. Rennie stayed some days at Vohitra, sitting figuratively and sometimes literally at the feet of both ladies. He was shy of grief, and at first looked with distrust at Leoline's black-gowned figure. But her composed manner reassured while it puzzled him. The women with whom he had been best acquainted had been of a type that hysterically wails its sorrows in the market-place, and is consolable the week after. But Mrs. Lewin was even capable of smiling at a small joke, though the flowerful softness of her face had a new gravity that seemed to have touched it with a shadow. Chum's eyebrows were always a little suggestive of tragedy, from a curve belied by her smiling eyes; but Rennie saw, vaguely, that the face he admired had gained something—a greater womanhood perhaps, almost the strength of maternity. Not having the key he put it down to Alaric Lewin's sudden death, but he did not think that she would be easily consoled. Lewin, poor fellow, had been of a type which Rennie could conscientiously admire. His good looks, coupled with a certain air of breeding about him, made him a model for younger men; and to play polo and tennis as Ally did by nature was attainment enough for military ambition. Ally, as a married man, almost made bachelorhood look puny, for the tie had never interfered with his attractiveness to the opposite sex. Rennie would have been a married man on such terms. No wonder that Mrs. Lewin's grief for this hero went deeper than a pocket-handkerchief.

He was sitting on a stool—but not of repentance—at her feet, on the evening before his departure. The stoep was their usual sitting-room, and they

had gathered there after dinner for desultory chat, Mrs. Gilderoy swinging her small compact body in the paintless remains of a rocking-chair, Mrs. Lewin leaning back against as many cushions as Rennie could find for her basket-work lounge, Rennie himself with his back to one of the pillars of the stoep, and his hands clasped round his knees. He had ridden down into the valley that afternoon with Mrs. Lewin to see the sugar factory, and while becoming a little heady with the changing colours of her eyes, he did not know that the smell of the rich sugar brought back the day she went over Denver's, and that a ghost walked by her in his place and pointed out all the transformations of the cane to her, from the crushing and ejection of the waste for fuel, to the last refinement and glittering heaps waiting to be bagged. The dark, luscious-smelling place was a dream of sugar, but the two who wandered about among its thunderous machinery were thinking of an alien sweetness.

"I must write a note to my good man for you to take back with you," Mrs. Gilderoy remarked after a time, and she went into the bungalow to do it. Mrs. Lewin and Rennie sat silent. She did not notice that he was plaiting a frill of her gown between his confident fingers; his presence was as little to her as the fireflies and lamp-beetles starring the grass, for she was thinking of Ally. It was one of her hours of remorse when an intolerable sense of responsibility for the ceasing of his strong young vitality bowed her with irresistible force. At such moments she would have sacrificed all her after life to his memory, and done penance because she felt herself the indirect cause of a fate she could not foresee. When she was less morbid she saw that even a strong woman cannot stand between a weak man and the consequence of his own actions, but

her torturing conscience accused her of complicity with Gregory because for the space of some weeks she had allowed herself to be happy. At such moments she did not plead innocence of any participation in his darker plans; she felt that to expiate her own sin she must sacrifice both herself and him for all the years of strong life that lay before them.

"I wish I knew you better, Mrs. Lewin," Rennie said suddenly.

"Why?" she asked, coming back to the present with a start. She looked down at his young good looks and audacious eyes, and realised that he had been playing with her gown, which she quietly drew away.

"I should so like to call you by your Christian name," said Rennie, with the happy safety of his youth. Women never snubbed him very severely, because the flushed colour of his face suggested the school-boy still.

Leoline smiled a little whimsically. "That is the disadvantage of going by a general nickname," she said good-naturedly, supposing that the compromising "Chum" on so many lips had tempted him.

"Oh, I don't mean your nickname," he said somewhat loftily. "Every one uses that—all the women, at least. They have made it common. But I envy Gurney when he sings that song about you." He began to hum "Leoline."

"We sang our songs together till the stars shook in the skies—
We spoke—we spoke of common things, but the tears were in our eyes.
And my hand I know it trembled to each light, warm touch of thine—
Yet we are friends, and only friends, my lost love Leoline."

"I always think it is a little high-flown for every day," said Mrs. Lewin, with a view to the salutary effect of being matter-of-fact. A big, white moon

was shining down the valley and silvering the sweep of cane, and the fireflies and intoxicating scents made sentiment a little excusable.

"I shouldn't call you Leoline," said Rennie, with a conscious sense of his own cleverness in distinction. "I should shorten it for every day, as you say. I like Leo better. No one calls you Leo."

She rose abruptly, with a movement of protest beyond the power of control, and walked to the further end of the stoep, remarking, "I am sorry that I do not feel inclined to accord the privilege."

Just a boy's light words! Yet she remembered with a rush of pain how, long since, Mrs. Churton had asked leave to call her Chum, and she had said yes, and Mrs. Gilderoy had apologised for using her husband's name for her. She had not cared—"Every one calls me Chum!" she had said lightly, and the name had grown, as Rennie said, common. Yet the sound of that natural contraction of Leoline on other lips than Gregory's had aroused all the tigress in her to defend a sacred right. It was Gregory's name for her—one, curiously enough, that no one else had ever used, even in her home-life before her marriage. As Rennie said, "No one calls you Leo"—no one, that is, before a prying public. In the sanctity of their closer love it had been the dearest of sounds to her, the little tender name that his suppressed voice had made a mere whisper for her ears alone.

She leaned there, at the end of the stoep, looking out into the blaze of the moonlight which greyed the wooded mountains, and made the cane a magic harvest for fairies to reap. She longed at this moment for some one to confide her doubts to, and the tumult in her mind, and curiously enough her thoughts turned to Mrs. Ritchie Stern, the comparative stranger with the sea-winds haunting her blue

eyes—the wife who loved her husband, and had spoken of children to a childless woman. . . . Some pulse seemed to beat and burn in Leoline's bosom. Her heart turned to water in her, and all her life demanded the man she had been schooling herself to renounce—demanded not only him, but to be completed in him, bound by the strong tie of the flesh that earth at least can give, be the communion of saints what it may in Heaven.

The most pitiful and natural outcry ever put into a woman's mouth, was that despairing "I loved him —and I did not bear his child!" It is very indecent, because no woman who is not indemnified by law and the Church has any right to feel the life quicken in her veins for any man, no matter how much her mate by instinct and suitability. She may, however, ask God's blessing on a loveless union, and know that she lies through every vow she makes, and then—the joys of the flesh are no more lust! Without a legal right love itself is a sin, but the woman who is so forgetful of convention that she can yearn for the natural outcome of childbirth is pilloried in every moral market-place of the world. It seems a pity that, since we have accepted the decalogue, nature must always be immoral; but looked at in one sense even the marriage service is only sanctifying a breach of divine commandment. Leoline Lewin was traditional enough to feel her modesty damaged by her own unruly pulses. There was an accusation in every memory of Gregory's clasp, and yet she could not conscientiously confess herself repentant, or say in truth that she would undo one moment of that too-keen pleasure. She looked up blankly at the inscrutable heavens, serenely blue and out of reach of question.

"How can one repent for being perfectly happy?" she said.

CHAPTER XVIII

"He who will not have peace, God sends him war."—*English Proverb.*

The Administrator stepped out of the writing-room quickly, through the ever-open window, tripped, and nearly fell headlong on the stoep. He looked down, as he caught the vine-clad pillar, to see what had nearly wrought his destruction. A man, a half-caste, lay huddled at his feet, in an attitude so like death that a stranger would have been deceived. Evelyn Gregory had seen that death-sleep before; he bent down closely, pushed the man over with his foot, and sniffed the heavy breath that came every thirty seconds or so through the open mouth. Then he stood up again, erect, at his full six feet three inches, and looked across the gardens of Government House, that seemed to drift away into glades of fainter and fainter colour, until it was only a green glow. His active eyes may have seen the vegetation, but they certainly saw something else—a picture inside his head rather than outside. After a second he raised his voice and called.

Two Arabs answered the Administrator's summons, on the principle that Saadat el basha (his Excellency) usually demanded strenuous tasks too heavy for one man. Gregory looked with steady, lidless eyes from them to the apparently lifeless body, and pointed to it with a curt gesture.

"Take that away," he said in his horribly under-breathed voice, "and lay him somewhere to recover.

He is not dead—he has been smoking ganja." He paused, looked down at the helpless body, and added three words whose bestial insult they could understand—"*Ya ibn kelb!*" (This is not even Malagasy—it is Arabic, and it conveys that your parentage was not all it might be with advantage to yourself.)

The Arabs lifted the half-caste native, and carried him away out of range of Gregory's savage eyes. He was a sais in their phrase—a Zanzalaky or pony-boy in Key Island, and attached to the Government House stables. Why he had crawled on to the stoep in the state he was when he had fallen asleep they did not ask. It was a disaster sent by Allah, and would bring him the kourbash, which was their name for Gregory's shambok.

The Administrator continued his interrupted way, walked off the stoep, and was half across the grass when he spied a pony trotting up the drive, and turned aside to speak to the rider. No man trotted in such heat save one in Key Island, and that was the O.C.T. Gregory turned back with him to the house.

"Just the man I wanted!" he said. "I was coming down to the club to look for you. Come in here."

Churton threw his leg over his pony's neck, polo fashion, and dropped off, a groom appearing as if by magic to take the animal. There were so many servants always waiting on noiseless bare feet at Government House that it was rarely necessary to shout as Gregory had done.

"I've just had a warning," said the Administrator, leading the way back into the room he had left. "Sit down—whiskey or cého?"

"Whiskey, thanks."

"A man was lying in a drunken sleep just outside

that window," said the Administrator, with a backward nod, as he opened the soda-water for his guest himself, and poured in the spirit. "He must have been there a very short time—he will lie like that for three days now."

Churton raised the glass.

"Here's to you!" he said significantly. "What was it? Hemp?"

"Yes—ganja. They have given up brewing it because we were watching for the still, but they've got some of the crop, and they are teaching the natives to smoke it like opium. It means a fresh raid."

"And more slaughter! Well, I shall be glad of a little diversion." An ugly, dark look flitted over the soldier's face, and wrinkled his broad forehead. There seemed more grey in his thick dark hair of late, and a line of pain round the firm lips. "Any notion where the trouble rises?" he said.

"I have an idea that it's beyond China Town, in that valley between the Tableland and Hashish."

"But, my dear fellow, there's no way through—it's all 'dirty,' and as full of scrub as it can be. I came down that way from shooting on the Tableland and found it nearly impassable. No room for crops."

"There's room for storage. I don't mean in the valley itself, but nearer the Little Zambesi. Anyhow I shall raid Sand Bay. There are caves there."

Churton sat thoughtfully for a minute, the tumbler in his strong brown hand. He felt desperately that he would be glad of a scrimmage, if only the beggars would show fight. But when was a coloured man game enough?

"They've been quiet for this last month or so," he said regretfully. "Ever since that little demonstration in your garden here."

"That was a flash in the pan—it meant nothing."

"It only frightened Mrs. Lewin. Have you heard anything of her, by the way?"

"She is still at Vohitra."

"I know. My wife talks of going out there when Mrs. Gilderoy returns. She can't stand her in the same house."

"I have not seen Mrs. Lewin for some weeks—not since she went out, in fact," said Gregory deliberately. He looked at the man before him as if measuring him, almost stealthily, and licked his lips to moisten them in the tigerish fashion peculiar to him before some inhuman effort. Churton was not looking at him; he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, one hand still holding the half-empty tumbler, the other hanging loosely against his puttee. The massive lines of his head and neck were thrown into prominence by the forward thrust of his shoulders.

"Strong man to strong man!" said Gregory rapidly to his own heart. "And I like him . . . but some one must go under. He has to be the sacrifice."

"Mrs. Lewin declines to see me," he said slowly, choosing his words with care. "She not unnaturally connects me with her husband's death, as I was the unfortunate cause of his going to East Africa. Not being very logical she forgets her own anxiety that Captain Lewin should have a chance to show what stuff he was made off. Well, he showed it—but as I gave him the chance, his wife gives me the blame!"

Churton nodded without speaking. His attitude was sympathetic so far. Then Gregory did one of those things that had made men follow his order into death itself, and die silent, having bought him

life, and—what he valued more—success. A touch of human weakness in his almost inhuman strength had been his great coup on occasions which had never been recorded, for something in his personality attracted men and women alike of an infinitely higher type than himself, and when he used that magnetism it had never failed him.

He laid his hand on Churton's shoulder, and his quick panting voice was a broken whisper.

"Churton, I'm desperate! She is everything to me—but her husband, dead, is a stronger barrier even than living. She is making a shrine of his memory, and thinks she must be faithful to it."

The real secret of Gregory's influence was that his appeal was genuine, though made with a further end in view. He did not lay bare his secrets for a light reason. He could feel his own earnestness touching Bute Churton in spite of self-interest and the reserve of training and tradition. He looked up with a haggard face that would have shaken any resolution less ruthless than Gregory's.

"Is that how it is?" he said quietly. "Well, you have my best wishes. And you can tell her that she owes no allegiance to her husband's memory, I —knew him more intimately than she. Men do know each other so—see? He was not faithful to her, even after six months." He paused, set the empty tumbler on the table as if in complete control of his nerves, and added in the same level tone: "You had better make her understand that Lewin was no ideal for her to cherish. Otherwise—she is a good woman—she might not listen to you."

Gregory drew a breath of relief that caught itself in his throat. The thing he had suspected was confirmed—at least he had tacit consent from Churton to use his suspicion. The sacrifice of the man before him in extracting such a bitter confession was,

as always, a second consideration to his own gain. He held an advantage now to use in his own behalf with Leoline Lewin, and if it had been necessary to drag Churton through the mire of mentioning his wife's very name he would not have stopped at doing so, nor did he doubt his own success. He was quick to reckon chances, and the vulnerable points of those with whom he had to deal—such insight had been a necessity to him. He knew that the more generous nature had been touched by the unlocking of his own secret; nothing less would have worked on him to admit as much as he had. He took his hand off Churton's shoulder, and said, "Thank you, old fellow!" as simply as a schoolboy, and Churton thought himself rewarded.

There was truth, too, in his saying that he was desperate. A kind of hunger for the woman he loved possessed him, and he had not seen her to speak to since the night when he betrayed himself by a too-great anxiety to bind her to him. She had withdrawn herself beyond reach of his immediate influence, and he dared not force her to an encounter. Twice he had been at Port Albert, and had found Vohitra closed to him—by Mrs. Lewin's own request he paid her no visit of condolence. He could not realise that the tie between them was not endangered by absence, or that material things had no influence upon Leoline's feelings for him. A man loves with his five senses; but a woman with all her instincts and a few over. It does not really matter to her if he is ill-favoured, or has given her a badly-cooked dinner, or a world divides them, or he talks about himself, or some one has burnt the fat and the smell is pervading the house—so long as he is her chosen to her she can go on love-making, in fancy if need be, without distraction. But you must satisfy the eyes, and the palate, and the long-

ing touch, and the egotistical ear, and the sensitive nose, before a man is well pleased and thinks tenderly of the opposite sex. Long before Leoline Lewin was ripe for seeing him again, Gregory was fretting because he thought his influence slackened by distance. He wanted to bring the power of his personality to bear again before he could feel sure of his ultimate success.

At first, as the days lengthened into weeks, he had been patient to let her recover from the shock of her husband's death, to go away and mourn for him if need be, for decency's sake. But he had meant to see her under the cloak of a conventional sympathy, and when he found himself denied her presence he chafed, and then, risking Mrs. Gilderoy's eyes, he wrote to her. It had been difficult to answer, in the face of her own renewed desire, but she had quietly demanded time. She was going home next mail; she would see him to say goodbye, and they might meet again in England. Her date of meeting had a far-off sound, and he realised that conventional widowhood meant at least a year's probation. To the man of immediate action, a man like Gregory, such flimsy delays were irritating; and yet he recognised the importance of social standing, and the slur of a hurried marriage. At least he must force a definite promise before the mail arrived and she slipped beyond his grasp, and even to do this meant a violation of her husband's memory. It was then that Gregory thought of certain hints he had heard of his A.D.C. and the women of the station, for Halton had carried adder's poison under his tongue to justify his own devotion in the earlier days of his intimacy with Mrs. Lewin. Absorbed in weightier matters, and contemptuous of gossip, Gregory had not interested himself in such slight things as Alaric Lewin's infidelities, and

when his need came, he could remember nothing but an outline. He did not know, however, whither his incompetent *aide* had always been lured away from duty, and his own savage strictures on tennis and Maitso recurred to him. The inference was natural, and with a broad master-stroke of policy, he drained Diana's husband for information—the man most unlikely to know on the surface of things, the man most likely to know in Gregory's sardonic experience of such situations. These things always leaked out, and worked to silent tragedies between husband and wife. Churton would know—and for his own ends Evelyn Gregory could make use even of a dead man's gallantries.

Up in the silence of Vohitra a runner brought a letter to Leoline Lewin a day or so after Churton had spoken with the Administrator. At the sight of the hand-writing her heart stood still again, and she did not think to look at the messenger, who, according to the date of the missive, should have been there before. There was a restless excitement about the man, half fear, half exultation, for he brought other news than that in the letter—but Mrs. Lewin found her own sufficient for the moment, and read and re-read the small characteristic writing as if fascinated.

Gregory was never merciful. He tore the last of her illusions from her, and laid bare a grizzly truth —though he did it in decent words—without compunction. Certain sentences in that letter seemed to buzz in her ears without keeping the connection. They meant nothing, and yet they meant so much.

"If you are refusing to see me from a feeling of loyalty to Captain Lewin your sacrifice is thrown away, for he was not loyal to you. . . ."

No? Not even the faith in her married life left

to her? Married one short year, and she could not keep her husband's fidelity—she felt the humiliation of the bald statement in Gregory's words. It had been another of her theories that a woman like herself could keep any man. It seemed that all her virtues and attractions had not prevented Alaric from straying. And where had he strayed? With innocent conceit she had seen herself the fairest, best-gowned, quickest-witted woman, at all events in the little shoddy Station. But it appeared that she was less invincible than she thought. Other sentences in that letter followed to enlighten her.

"I am not speaking on my own authority. Other men—Major Churton principally—confirm my assertion that your husband was no pattern of fidelity. You can guess for whom he left you—we need not attack his memory for a thing that is over and done with. But to vow to be true to one who could hardly demand it as due to him is making the position ridiculous. . . .

"I am only supposing that this is what has closed your heart to me. But am I not at least as worthy of allegiance as Lewin? Understand that it was not merely a venial sin, such as you may call your own during his absence—I have Churton's testimony, poor fellow. . . ."

Then it was as if a blaze of pain blotted out the words of the letter for a moment. She saw and recognised many things in that sacrifice of Bute Churton's name. Di . . . and Ally! The horrible vulgarity of it, the degradation of even her slight friendship with the woman, made her revolt. She could have forgiven it better had he done such a thing with half a world between them, even though his partner in guilt had professed to like her; but in the narrow confines of Port Victoria it seemed abominable. Her last ideal was torn from her, and

the worst of it was that in the light of Ally's backsliding she saw what her own had nearly been. In her thoughts, her desires, perhaps, she had been worse, since his passions, like his whole nature, were slighter than her own. She rose to her feet in that intolerable revelation, the letter crushed in her hand . . . and for the first time she saw, consciously, the native runner who had brought it.

He had been waiting with hideous eagerness to catch her attention. The minute he saw that she was looking at him with expectation he babbled with speech, his head nodding vaguely towards the way he had come, childish eagerness and horrid enjoyment in his face.

"I heap big trouble to come through, Missus. The land is up—they dance the Cannab dance in Po' Victoria."

She caught her breath, and her wide blazing eyes held his like a snake's.

"What is that you say? Tell me more. What has happened?"

"You hear nothing hyar? No—the ra not reach you. The Panjaka-Baas ——"

"Mr. Gregory—the Administrator—yes?" She knew that queer native jumble of a title for him, for panjaka means king or head lord, and the South African baas or master had drifted into Key Island with the white man's authority.

"First he burn the Cannab—but the Chiney man he keep back some. Then the Panjaka-Baas he guess there is some still, for the nigger still get drunk." He rubbed his hands and grinned as if in delighted reminiscence. "They make a raid at Sand Bay and find the Cannab cane—lots an' lots hidden there! And *then* the land is up and they dance!"

Leoline, without turning her eyes away, as though

afraid he might escape if she did, called, "Mrs. Gilderoy!" Her friend answered her from the house, and a minute later came out on to the stoep, with a sharp glance of surprise at the runner.

"He brought me a letter," Mrs. Lewin explained briefly. "He comes from Port Victoria. Tell this lady what you have told me!" she commanded.

The native did so, laughing inanely through the narrative, and helped on by Leoline's prompting. "Ra!" (blood) said the native. "Heaps ra!" The two women looked at each other with ashen faces.

"Is it true, do you think?" Mrs. Lewin said.

"I don't know—but I must go to my husband," said Mrs. Gilderoy decidedly.

"I thought you might wish."

"I shall get down to Port Albert to-night, and take to-morrow's boat. I can telephone through from there too. If only we had one here!"

"No telephone. Wires cut!" jabbered the runner.

"Oh, good heavens! . . . Will you come too, or remain here?" said Mrs. Gilderoy, controlling herself and turning to Mrs. Lewin.

"I shall stay here—at present. There is nothing I could do there, and I should only be in the way with no man to look after me. In a few days I may come round, the mail is nearly due."

"But, my dear, the land is up—that means that the natives have risen all over the island, I expect."

"I am not afraid."

"Well, I am!" said Mrs. Gilderoy honestly. "Afraid for my husband, if not for myself. Can't we get more news out of this creature? Make him speak, Chum, for goodness sake, or I shall kill him with kourbash! My riding-crop is heavy!"

"Tell us more," said Mrs. Lewin briefly to the native. "Are any matz (dead) of this ra?" (blood).

She mixed up Malagasy and English in her desperation.

"Many, Missus, the soldiers charge, and the people fall. But they kill one baas—yes, an officer!"

"Who? Who was it? What was his name?" Mrs. Gilderoy, like a leaping fury, had seized him by the shoulder and shook him in a frenzy of fear, so that he could only chatter and jabber at her incoherently. She was suddenly transformed to a mad woman in her anxiety. Beneath all her worldly wisdom and ironical remarks on the married state, she loved one man, and that was Wray Gilderoy. It was strange how this bitter-tongued couple had kept the sweetness of their union beneath all their jeering at other people's matrimony. Leoline felt it a real and consequently a precious thing, while she gently disengaged the native from Mrs. Gilderoy's clutch.

"You are only frightening him—he cannot speak to tell you," she said. "Now think, Zanzalaky—what is the name of the officer who is—who is—killed?"

"'Milton Gourney, Missus!"

"Gourney—Gurney! Hamilton Gurney! Oh, poor young fellow!"

She remembered the one thing that people always did distinguish in Gurney's vapid individuality—his voice. All the soul of the man seemed to lie in that good gift, and a lump rose in her throat at the memory of the songs that were hushed for ever. It seemed as wicked to have shot him as to shoot a nightingale.

But Mrs. Gilderoy had dropped into the nearest chair, and was moaning hysterically in her relief. The women she had laughed at for a too-demonstrative attachment to their husbands could have taken

an ample revenge could they have seen her then. But Mrs. Lewin felt only the deeper side of it, and saw no bathos in the rocking, undignified figure, tortured with being a woman and impotent while the man she cared for was exposed to danger in the proper course of things. They seemed to her to have left self-consciousness behind them and the shame that dogs an exhibition of real feeling, so that Vohitra always appeared in Leoline's memory as a little stage and scenic effects to the intensity of two or three figures—her own and Mrs. Gilderoy's at the present moment.

She had no time to think of herself and her private anxiety during the next few hours, through which it seemed to her she felt neither heat nor tire, but pushed the frightened useless black servants aside and packed her friend's belongings for her with capable hands. It was only when Mrs. Gilderoy had stumbled away down the hillside, hardly guiding her pony for the first time on record, that she had the leisure to face her own intolerable dread. Her cheek was wet where Mrs. Gilderoy had kissed her, but not with her own tears. She had no open right to cry, but she looked at the letter which had seemed only a new dismay a few hours ago, and thought that it might be the last she should ever receive in that handwriting. . . .

For if there were any concerted attack, and organised hate in the brain maddened by hashish and ganja, it would all be directed against the Administrator. Gregory was the man to fall, by treachery or open warfare, and she recognised the maddening position she was in by being cut off from news. Even if she went down to Port Albert the telephone wires were cut, and they were dependent for information on the little coasting steamers which at best were irregular. When Mrs. Gilderoy had asked if

she would stay at Vohitra or come back with her, Leoline had answered with the unselfish impulse of her love, seeing in a flash of comprehension that her presence would only hamper Gregory, and paralyse his action with a private anxiety. She had not thought of herself at all in that moment, nor did she regret her decision now by the light of reason; but her heart cried out in its distress that her place was with him, and that not to know of his safety was unbearable, with a desire as great as Mrs. Gilderoy's. She had no right to act the weak woman, and please herself at the expense of the man she loved—no right justified, like Mrs. Gilderoy's, by years of open marriage. Gregory would believe her safe at Vohitra, and be freer to use the brain and nerve, in which she took some comfort, remembering the night when he had cleared the stoep, alone, with no weapon but a shambok. But she realised, during the next few days, that she had set herself the hardest task that a woman can—to wait and endure the anxiety in silence, that a man may feel her a helpmate, and not a burden.

Life went on the same in the Tsara Valley in spite of the panic that threatened the whole island. The coloured people were cutting the cane, driven by the dogged wills of a few strong white men, whose grim determination triumphantly proved them once more the dominant race. The planters saved their crops as if nothing had happened to upset the usual routine of harvest, and though labour was scarce, they quietly forced the natives who had not been drawn to the centre of trouble to work as usual. There had been a meeting at Port Albert, and a concerted plan of action agreed upon amongst those men most experienced in the island, the result being that the rioting in the other districts

hardly affected the little seaport, and the sugar harvest was not ruined. Gradually the influence of these few men made itself felt amongst the dangerous numbers of mixed races; and Mrs. Lewin, from the stoep at Vohitra, saw the dark forms bending in the furrows, the mellowing blades falling, and, leaving the ground shorn of its gold-green glory, the trucks pass up and down the whole sweep of the valley, while the factory smoked through the long, hot days. Once the town warden rode out to pay her a hurried visit, and give her what news he could; but he was a busy man—Gregory's representative, and the despot of the town—and could spare but little time. He left some of his own servants at Vohitra whom he could trust, and asked Mrs. Lewin quietly if she could charge and fire a revolver.

"Yes," she said briefly, remembering that Gregory had asked her the same question once before, at the last threatened rising.

"I have brought you one of mine—you had better keep it by you," Ambroise said cheerfully. "I don't think there will be the least necessity for it, but it is as well that the people about you should know you are armed."

"Have you any news?"

"The island is quieting down, and I do not think anyhow it would spread out this way. But there has been real fighting at Port Victoria, and the troops were called out. One poor fellow was killed in the first skirmish—Hamilton Gurney. Did you know him?"

"Yes. I used to admire his voice so much. Poor fellow! How was it?"

"There was a rush in the Square, and they got him up against the Market buildings. You know those steps? He was trying to get through the

mob with some girl, and they stabbed him with a razor they had looted from a private house. No one knows who did it, of course."

"Where were the troops?"

"They arrived on the scene three minutes later. It was very sudden—those risings always are—and Gurney had no warning. He was not in uniform at all, or with his men—he had been in town, and was going to ride out to Maitso, but he had not had any orders even."

"And the girl?"

"Oh, the girl is all right, except that she had hysterics. Two or three white people were wounded, and about a hundred niggers have been killed—I wish it had been a thousand!" said Ambroise savagely. "But I think they have had a lesson."

"Port Victoria is quiet, then? I wonder if I might go round? The mail is almost due," she added with an instinct of caution to veil her real reason.

"Well, it is getting that way, but I think you are better off here at present. It was the most sensible thing you could do to stop here. The place will be lamb-like when you do see it again. As far as Key'land goes such a rising was just what was wanted."

"But the loss of life!" she exclaimed with a shudder.

"You can't help that, and you can only teach the natives respect for the British Empire by a military lesson delivered some time or other. Last time, you see, they got off with a warning, and we all felt that once the troops were here they ought to be punished. Most places catch it that have Gregory as Administrator, and are chastened afterwards. He is the right man in the right place—I'd rather

work under him than any man who comes out with a theory of 'It's all done by kindness.'"

She tried to keep her face from tingling, and smiled faintly. "You are almost as drastic in your views as the Administrator. Has he—has he come out of the fray unscathed?"

"Oh, he's all right—so far." Ambroise laughed, unknowing that his words frightened her. "He has given them a dose of Gregory's Powder, and they are making wry faces over it. But he is a man who always carries his life in his hand, Mrs. Lewin—he always will, wherever he is."

She turned away, sick at heart. In her ignorance of the fate that pressed her rapidly, she pictured herself far off from Gregory, in England, thinking of those words that his admiring lieutenant had said. Wherever he might go he would carry his life in his hand, from his savage unofficialism that never got into the papers, and she for a year at least would be as helpless and uncognisant of his movements and fate as she was now. She had no premonition that those whose lives were interwoven with Gregory's were whirled into quick action with his overmastering vitality, and hurried out of the usual course of events. Life always went quickly with him. He did not lose time through being handicapped by red tape of any description, as his Service was grimly aware. But these things were hid in secret drawers at the Colonial Office, and filed for censure about once in every appointment that Evelyn Gregory had ever had.

Mrs. Gilderoy had been gone but three or four days when in the evening of that following Ambroise's visit one of the servants brought Leoline a note from her, saying that it had come by a messenger who was waiting. Mrs. Lewin had been sitting at the improvised writing-table in her own bed-

room—one of those passion-haunted rooms from whose suggested associations she could never get away after Mrs. Gilderoy had put the fancy into her head. With the note in her hand she rose at once and went across the passage and out on to the stoep, because the natives usually waited there. Her long black gown swished across the bare boards as she went, where other women's had whispered in the same feminine tongue during long-dead summers.

"—except poor Gurney, who paid the forfeit of his life for running after Trixie Denver anyhow. How matters stood between them one doesn't know, but the girl is behaving as if she were his *fiancée* at least—if not his widow! She goes about in deep mourning——"

Leoline put the letter on one side to read presently, raised her eyes as she came out on to the stoep, and saw Evelyn Gregory.

The sun was setting behind Vohitra, but the house faced north-east, and the late long beams still struck that side of the stoep where they met. Their faces were in the shadow, the dusty light only bathing them warmly to the waist, and she saw that there was some strong purpose in his seeking her here even as she met his eyes. For a minute she seemed to wait between one life and another before he spoke—the old theoretical life of her untried girlhood, dear with the bright things of the world, that even her wifehood had left unaltered; and the deeper painful realities of existence that he had called into being for her. She knew, before he spoke, that a decision awaited her now, as to whether she should pass definitely from one to the other, and it seemed to her that she hardly faltered.

"I have come to you to put a choice before you," he said, even as he took her hand and held it in his strong grip. He gave her no conventional greeting,

though so much had happened since they had said good-bye in the bungalow . . . the night before she got Ally's letter. "I have very little time to spare—I must go back in an hour at most. The town is under my authority at present, and I am responsible."

His word told her enough. "You have been recalled!" she said quietly.

"Yes; Halton has reached England," he said significantly. "But apart from any private pulling of the strings, I expected this—perhaps. There was just a chance I might wire through, but it was unlikely. They are sending out another man."

"From England?"

"Ultimately. From Capetown at present."

"And you go home?"

"As things now stand—officially. But I have private information that I am to go to Central Africa again."

"Is this"—she moistened her dry lips—"because of Port Cecil?"

"Partly, I suppose. It was touch-and-go there after Lewin's death." (Did he ever shrink before a name? She could not have spoken so.) "But Melton Hanney pulled the Empire out of a war. He should get something for that!" He smiled grimly.

"You have heard from Capetown?"

"I have." He spoke more grimly still. Into his hard eyes flashed the passing soreness of a spoiled ambition. And he had meant to do so much with that insignificant tool, Key Island!—to make it so much the very centre of warring destinies that no one in after years could speak of it without an historical significance. He knew, as even she could not understand, the result of the thing he had dared to do, and he saw his future,

perhaps, as another man did, "behind him!" For one cannot stake Empires and not lose something, even though one win a private and personal gain. Something was left him out of the wreck on which to begin to build anew—a fresh incentive to rise in the fair woman before him, whom he had coveted to the height of tossing lives aside for her, and committing tactic murder. He stretched out his hands and took hers gently.

"Will you come into the wilderness with me?" he said, with a curious little smile. "Dare you be my wife and share my fortunes—now?"

For a second she half drew back, not at the thing he suggested, but the hurry it implied. "At once—so soon?" breathed her training.

"At once—so soon!" he echoed, not one line of concession in his face or voice. "That wherever I go I may take you with me. I am not offering you an easy position, or an establishment in life, I assure you! I am a man who wants his wife beside him, wherever it is possible. I shall very likely want you where most men would say it was not possible. If you are afraid for your children, it may mean parting from them, or if we can make a home where other men give up all hope of family ties, I shall ask you to risk it."

"I am not *afraid!*" she said proudly, but rather breathlessly.

"Except for the weight of public opinion against a hurried marriage? I meant to spare you that. But things are worse with me than I hoped they might be, and the stroke fell more swiftly." He set his teeth and thought of Halton. "I have not much to offer you!" he said, and his voice had suddenly hoarsened. "But I think you love me—I know I love you. There is trouble for us in the future, but I have still the fighting powers that have made me

what I am. I can give you love, and strength to win you back the position that I have imperilled for you." His voice sharpened still more with sudden fear, and his hands tightened on hers. Even she did not realise how great the dread of losing her had been, but it drove him almost to an appeal. "Leo, in common humanity you will not turn from me now?"

How much we mean by that word humanity! It contains all the virtues with which we do not credit God. Perhaps Leoline felt that a little more was being asked of her than the simply human side would have acceded, but the diviner spark burned up to meet the demand upon it. She looked into his compelling eyes, and in that moment of her love, perfected, she cast out fear for ever.

"I will come with you!" was all she said; and it was her arms as well as his that drew them together.

"God bless you!" she heard him say with the old under-breathed voice she knew, and that had thrilled her out of all theories into the pain and glory of womanhood. "God keep you safely, and bless you, my darling!" It is when a strong man loves something better than himself that he feels his impotence, and hastens to charge it on the Deity he affects to do well without, himself. The most irreligious men are always ready to pray above the heads nearest and dearest to them. Gregory, who would have snapped any commandment left undefended by law, called on the Unknown God to do the one thing of which he felt himself incapable. With the woman he had loved in his arms he fell back on an instinct which is greater even than habit —

"God bless you, because you are my darling!"

The sun had reached the hill crest, and his last

level glow touched their faces at last with unnatural fire. For a minute Leoline was dazzled, but through the haze she looked out over the half-reaped valley, and it was as if she saw Key Island in symbol, the strange little place to which she had come so light-heartedly to find fate and tragedy there. His glance followed hers, but he saw nothing of the peaceful harvest or rest at evening time. To his steady gaze the red light was War and his future wrapped in smoke. He did not fear, and he did not repent, because he had long since counted the cost, and reckoned it as gain; but he knew, as that old-time counterpart of his sin had known, that there was no peace for him or his—and that because he had despised the unwritten law, War should be his portion for ever, as clearly as if the prophet had said to him also, "Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house!"

And the woman for whom he had sinned knew also that there was a shadow on their lives for ever, cast by the man they had sacrificed, and that she could never dare to look her love bravely in the face without that dark reservation that she thrust out of sight. She did not repent either—with her hand in that of the man she loved she was ready to go with him into the wilderness as he had said, and let him lead her where he would, the stony places were gentle so long as it was his path also. But her eyes, as they looked over the golden transfigured valley, held all the pain of the love that is earth-marred, and she knew that the tragedy of her life lay in that sealing of their destinies.

THE END

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